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Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*

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Book Notice

Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35 and Part 2: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Alma 36–Moroni 10*. Vol. 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015.

HAD THERE BEEN NO BOOK OF MORMON, the counterfactual historian could argue, there would be no need for a Joseph Smith Papers project. The Latter-day Saint prophet's first recorded revelation appeared "after he had lost certain writings which he had Translated by the gift & Power of God," the famous 116 pages.¹ Smith's gift of translation was suspended for a time, but he would ultimately dictate the majority of the Book of Mormon text to Oliver Cowdery and a few other scribes between early April and late June 1829. Having grown protective of this original manuscript, Smith called for a copy to be made for the purposes of printing—the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon. After being stowed away in the cornerstone of a house in Nauvoo, Illinois, over 70 percent of the original manuscript was destroyed—this time not by the hands of "wicked men"² but by the ravages of water. The counterfactual historian could

1. Introduction to Revelation, July 1828, in Revelation Book 1, pp. 1–2 [D&C 3]; <http://josephsmithpapers.org/intro/revelations-and-translations-series-introduction>.

2. See Doctrine and Covenants section 10, which instructs Joseph Smith to continue his translation without redoing the portion that was lost when early scribe Martin Harris borrowed it.

argue that losing the 116 pages of the original manuscript set the stage for the preservation of almost all of the Book of Mormon in the form of the printer's manuscript, all of which was published in August 2015 in a two-part volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (JSP). "The Book of Mormon," notes the volume's dust jacket, "is the centerpiece of Joseph Smith's documentary record."

Transcriptions of the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon have been available for over a decade in Royal Skousen's Critical Text Project.³ Skousen teamed up with JSP editor Robin Scott Jensen to produce this new volume—a significant improvement on Skousen's earlier publications, especially in terms of aesthetics. For the initial printing of the Book of Mormon in 1830 and through two subsequent editions (1837 and 1840), the printer's manuscript was emended by several people, including Oliver Cowdery, John H. Gilbert, and Joseph and Hyrum Smith. In contrast to the Critical Text Project's awkward landscape greyscale style, these emendations are color-coded in the annotation along with significant differences between the printer's and original manuscript. Best of all, the volume features full color photographs of each page of the printer's manuscript, thereby offering unprecedented access to this priceless document. Those who can't afford the modestly priced printed books will be able to examine searchable manuscript images free of charge at josephsmithpapers.org. The transcription is based on Skousen's earlier publication but follows the Joseph Smith Papers style guide and is thus easier to read. At the same time, this means that Skousen's massive analysis of textual variants will remain relevant: "Slight mistakes (including extra dots or strokes of letters) or corrections are not transcribed, and deference is given to the scribe's final intent," and the manuscript is represented here "more liberally" than in the Critical Text Project.⁴

3. The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, later absorbed into the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, has sponsored Skousen's quarter-century Critical Text Project, a meticulous analysis of the original and printer's manuscripts and published editions of the Book of Mormon.

4. "Editorial Method," in *Revelations and Translations Vol. 3, Part 1*, xxx.

Two other aspects of this publication deserve notice. First, it would have been impossible without the cooperation of the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), who owns the manuscript and has taken care of it for over one hundred years. Additionally, a collection of RLDS photographs from 1923 aided in restoring a few minor words to the aged manuscript. These photographs are available on the Joseph Smith Papers website. This joint effort marks a significant milestone of cooperation between Community of Christ and the LDS Church. Second, the volume's useful seventeen-page introduction provides a brief overview of the Book of Mormon's contents, a historical account of Joseph Smith obtaining the plates, an overview of the process of translation, and a summary of the book's publication and early dissemination. Most striking is the inclusion of full-color photographs of a chocolate-colored artifact that matches descriptions of the seer stone Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon and the leather pouch Emma Smith purportedly made to house the stone. The seer stone passed from Smith to Oliver Cowdery to his brother-in-law Phineas Young (through Cowdery's widow, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery) to Brigham Young to Zina Diantha Huntington Young to Zina Young Williams Card to the president of the Church, presumably John Taylor (though the editors do not specify).⁵ The now-dimmed stone is a beautiful symbol of the increasing historical transparency of the LDS Church.

This new publication of the printer's manuscript suggests that the Book of Mormon's narrative of the Lamanites, Nephites, and Jesus Christ's ministry among them isn't the only Book of Mormon narrative of note, though the LDS Church still promotes that internal narrative as primary. To borrow a famous phrase from media theorist Marshall McLuhan, "The medium is the message." Important stories can be drawn from the physical manuscript itself. It contains a number of fascinating research possibilities for theologians who are interested in the nature of revelation and translation, for textual scholars who attend closely

5. "Volume Three Introduction," *Revelations and Translations Vol. 3, Part 1*, xx, xxi.

to word variants and adjustments, and for those interested in material culture who ask questions about the role this manuscript—its creation, interpretation, and maintenance—has played in the history of Mormonism.

—Blair Dee Hodges