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The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text

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Royal Skousen

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Reviewed by Robert L. Maxwell

Royal Skousen, professor of linguistics and English at Brigham Young University, has spent much of his career researching the text of the Book of Mormon. Over the last decade, he has published numerous textual studies of the Book of Mormon. The main volumes in his Book of Mormon critical text project include a typographical facsimile of its original manuscript,[1] another of the printer's manuscript,[2] and a monumental six-volume study of the textual variants of the Book of Mormon.[3] Although some of Skousen's work in this field is available on the web at maxwellinstitute.byu.edu, most of his scholarly volumes may be difficult to obtain and are probably too technical and too expensive for all but the most serious Book of Mormon scholars. Skousen has, therefore, with this volume published by Yale University Press, filled a gap by providing to a wider audience the main conclusions he has drawn from his twenty years of work in Book of Mormon textual analysis. Skousen's impressive work—which builds anew on a long Latter-day Saint tradition of utilizing the manuscripts, comparing the published editions, and analyzing the variants of this sacred scripture—leaves a lasting legacy that will be influential in this field of research for generations to come.

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1. *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2001).

2. *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2001).

3. *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon,* 6 parts (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2004–9).

The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text begins with a twenty-two-page introduction by Grant Hardy about the nature and coming forth of the Book of Mormon, together with an inviting call for the further study of that book within LDS, American, and world contexts; and also with a seventeen-page editor's preface by Skousen, describing the nature of the Book of Mormon text and the goals and typographical conventions of this "Yale Edition." The bulk of the book (1–738) consists of a presentation of the complete text of the Book of Mormon itself, a stemma showing the gene-alogy of the various published versions of the Book of Mormon (739–44), and a superb and most useful appendix setting forth in tabular form the 719 most significant textual (including 95 of the conjectural) differences between the Original and Printer's manuscripts and also between the dif-ferent printed editions (745–89).

The text of the Book of Mormon has been set in "sense lines," that is, by phrases and clauses, in an effort "to present to the reader a dictated rather than a written text" (xlii), as these phrases and clauses may have been sepa-rated as the translation was being dictated by Joseph Smith. Punctuation and paragraphing have been added; these elements are "noncanonical, yet grouping sentences into larger topical units is much like organizing phrases into sentences" (xliv). This format makes reading somewhat easier than the typeset columns used in most other printings of the scriptures. Modern spelling and regular capitalization have also been used throughout. Readers interested in the original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation will find that information in Skousen's earlier publications.

Royal Skousen's research has applied to the Book of Mormon the same level of intense textual scrutiny that biblical scholars have given to the Bible over the last several centuries. As anyone who has copied a text by hand will know, every time a text is copied, no matter how carefully, changes creep in. With important texts, it becomes the task of textual scholars to compare differing versions to try to recover the original, inasmuch as that is possible. It is particularly important to understand what the original text was when people regard that text as holy.

In the Latter-day Saint tradition, inspiration plays a part in discovering the original text. This was the basis of Joseph Smith's project to retranslate and revise the Bible: he wanted to find the original text and, as a prophet, he went directly to the source, receiving the text by inspiration. However, scholars who immerse themselves in the study of a text by comparing dif-ferent versions also have an important part to play in this process by dis-covering connections between manuscripts and other versions and coming

to logical conclusions based on the evidence of the available texts. This is exactly what Professor Skousen has accomplished.

Like biblical scholars who compare differing manuscripts to try to ascertain the original text of each book of the Bible, Skousen has compared differing texts of the Book of Mormon, namely the two manuscripts (the remains of the Original Manuscript, written down as Joseph Smith dictated the text, and the Printer's Manuscript, prepared by Oliver Cowdery for use by the typesetters in the printing of the 1830 first edition) and twenty textually significant printed editions, in an attempt to ascertain the original (English-language) text.

In the case of the New Testament, no original manuscripts by any of its writers have survived. The earliest fragmentary manuscripts we have are from the second century AD, and most of the important New Testament manuscripts were copied two or three centuries after the originals were written. Hundreds of subsequent manuscripts were also created, in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and several other ancient languages. Therefore, the work of presenting the text of the New Testament is an ongoing process involving comparison of hundreds of different New Testament manuscripts, understanding their relative importance and relationship to one another, and applying principles of textual criticism when attempting to determine which of several competing versions of an individual passage might be the original.

At first glance, the problem of finding the original text of the Book of Mormon seems much simpler. We have the complete original manuscript, don't we? Well, as a matter of fact, we do not. The Original Manuscript was placed in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House in 1841, and when the cornerstone was opened in the 1880s, it was discovered that 72 percent of the manuscript had been destroyed by water (xvi). Additionally, the extant 28 percent has evidence of erasures, corrections, and cross-outs (xv), suggesting that the process of transmission of the text from Joseph Smith's oral dictation to the pen of the first scribe unwittingly introduced occasional changes to the text (again, anyone who has attempted to copy verbatim an oral text will know how easily this can happen). In other words, this Original Manuscript was not the "original," in the sense that the true "original" consisted of the oral words that the Prophet pronounced as he translated the plates.

The second copy of the written text was the Printer's Manuscript. A comparison of this manuscript with the extant pages of the 28 percent of the Original Manuscript that has survived shows that Cowdery made an average of about three copying mistakes per page (xvi), from which one may assume that the error rate was about the same in the other 72 percent of

the Printer's Manuscript. Changes were also introduced as the printer type-set the manuscript to produce the 1830 first edition. Some of these changes were very minor, such as improper paragraphing, but some were unintended changes to the wording itself. As Hardy puts it in his introduction:

> Minor errors inadvertently crept into the text of the Book of Mormon at every stage of its transmission, from Joseph's occasional misreading of the text or from Oliver's mishearing some of Joseph's dictation, to visual misreadings of the original manuscript when copying the text into the printer's manuscript, to slips of the pen in writing, and to errors in setting the type for printed editions. There are also numerous deliberate corrections, some of which were made during the early transmission of the text and others which were added later as editors and typesetters prepared various editions of the Book of Mormon. (xvi)

Skousen began his work in 1988 with a careful examination and transcription of the remains of the Original and the Printer's Manuscripts. He next identified all the variants in the manuscripts and the printed editions, including words, phrases, capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and versification. Skousen then analyzed the evidence he found of insertions, deletions, and other corrections and changes. He also analyzed spacing, inks, and pen types used in the manuscripts. His findings are briefly characterized numerically on page xxxv. There are 2,241 differences between the Yale Edition and the standard LDS text, 606 of which "have never appeared in any standard printed edition." Of those 606 occurrences, 491 follow either the Original Manuscript, the Printer's Manuscript, or both; 2 are found in copies of the title page; and 113 are "conjectural" or "possible emendations" (xxxi).

What should we conclude from Skousen's efforts to discover the "earliest text" of the Book of Mormon? Skousen suggests that we should not conclude that canonized versions of the Book of Mormon should be revised to reflect this text. The aim of his study is to offer a scholarly reconstruction of the original text, not to suggest that any church that regards the Book of Mormon as scripture should "correct" their text. Hardy notes that Joseph Smith himself made numerous changes to the text, mostly grammatical, between the 1830, 1837, and 1840 printed editions (xx), suggesting that he did not regard the original dictation copy as a flawless text. Neither should we.

In addition, it should be clear from Skousen's meticulous work that the Book of Mormon not only can withstand the scrutiny of textual criticism but in fact deserves and rewards it. Skousen has given all readers many necessary tools with which to make judgments for themselves. Like everything else surrounding the gospel, one is expected to study the matter out

in one's mind (D&C 9:8) and come to conclusions by a combination of faith, inspiration, and intelligence. We might also conclude that the creation and transmission of the texts of all our scriptures have come to us through a union of human and divine processes, and that indeed the principle of continuing revelation applies to the study, analysis, and publication of canonized scripture as well as to any other parts of the true and living Church. But without the facts and other data before us, we would be unable to judge any of this very well. In giving us this information, we should thank Royal Skousen and all those who have supported the work of his career.

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