Approaching Completion: The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project: A Review of Royal Skousen's *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* and *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Grammatical Variation*

Grant Hardy
University of North Carolina at Asheville

Approaching Completion:
The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

A Review of Royal Skousen's *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* and *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Grammatical Variation*

Grant Hardy

Analysis of Textual Variants

In 2005, I wrote a very enthusiastic review of Royal Skousen's *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10,* the first part of volume 4 of his Book of Mormon Critical Text Project.[1] It seemed to herald the beginning of a new approach to Book of Mormon studies, one marked by an unprecedented level of detail, rigor, and professionalism. Today, a dozen years later, I think my initial excitement was fully justified. Skousen completed his *Analysis of Textual Variants* in six parts—each a large quarto-size book, published one per year, and together totaling 4,060 pages—in 2009, the same year that Yale University Press published his *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text,* a scholarly reconstruction of the text as first dictated by Joseph Smith, based on evidence from the original and printer's manuscripts, as well as early printed editions.[2] Since that monumental achievement, his work on the Critical Text Project has continued apace, with the first two parts of volume 3: *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon* (two large books on grammatical variation) appearing in 2016 and a second edition of the six parts of the *Analysis of Textual Variants* published last year, this time with 4,105 pages.[3]

---

1. Grant Hardy, "Scholarship for the Ages," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 43–53, 71.

2. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

3. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 2d ed., 6 parts (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies;

It happens with some regularity that academic books start with a strong opening chapter and then diminish in care and thoughtfulness as they come to a conclusion a couple hundred pages later. Initial chapters always get the lion's share of an author's attention, and it is difficult to sustain that same degree of effort. Even scholars get tired and distracted at times. By contrast, throughout the six parts of his *Analysis of Textual Variants,* Skousen has been able to fulfill the vision he had for the series from the beginning. I have read through all four thousand pages twice now, and I am continually impressed by the consistency of his high standards from first to last. The worth of this series for scholars, translators, commentators, teachers, and ordinary readers cannot be overstated.

The methodology of *Analysis of Textual Variants* (henceforth ATV) can be summarized fairly concisely. Skousen has carefully considered every phrase, word, and punctuation mark in the Book of Mormon as they appeared in the original manuscript (of which 28 percent is extant), the printer's manuscript (nearly all intact), and the twenty most significant editions in both the LDS and RLDS (or Community of Christ) traditions. He has tracked every change and parsed every sentence. Wherever there are variants or grammatical difficulties, he has attempted to determine the most probable earliest reading by analyzing handwriting, spelling, scribal or typesetters' habits, patterns of usage, biblical parallels, and similar examples from the history of the English language. Then he determines which variant is most likely to have been the original reading, or when none of the extant variants

---

Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2017); Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Grammatical Variation*, 2 parts (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2016).The overall organization of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project is as follows, with each part consisting of a separate quarto-size book published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies:

Volume 1. *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (2001).

Volume 2. *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text*, *in Two Parts* (2001).

Volume 3. *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon,* in seven parts (2016–).

Volume 4. *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon,* in six parts (2004–9; 2d ed., 2017).

Volume 5. *A Complete Electronic Collation of the Book of Mormon* (forthcoming).

are viable, he suggests a conjectural emendation, that is, a reading that has never appeared in any manuscript or printed edition. Conjectural emendations have been made by various scribes, typesetters, and editors throughout the history of the text, so this is nothing new.[4] Two quick examples, from the first and last chapters of the Book of Mormon, may help illustrate the sorts of arguments that Skousen makes (readers are free to dip anywhere into the text themselves with a few computer keystrokes; all six parts from the first edition of ATV are available in their entirety online).[5]

In the printer's manuscript and 1830 edition, 1 Nephi 1:3 reads, "and I know that the record which I make to be true" (the original manuscript is not extant for this verse). This was changed by Joseph Smith for the second edition (1837) to "and I know that the record which I make is true." The editing came about because the earlier reading awkwardly mixed the subordinate conjunction *that* with the infinitive phrase *to be.* Another way for Joseph to have corrected the grammar would have been to delete the *that* so that it read like 3 Nephi 5:18: "and I know the record which I make to be a just and a true record." In fact, he made this correction at Moroni 4:1 for the 1837 edition. The question, then, is whether the *that* might have been accidentally added to 1 Nephi 1:3 either in transcribing the original dictation or in copying from the original to the printer's manuscript. Skousen goes through the entire text looking for instances where scribes might have accidentally added or deleted the subordinate conjunction *that* after the verb *know* and finds no examples of additions and only five deletions. So, for the earliest text of the Book of Mormon, he counts 307 instances of a clause with *that* after the verb *know* (including the five mistakes) and 12 instances of clauses without *that* after the same verb (with no known errors) (1:57–58). Fortunately, after each entry in ATV he provides a quick summary, which in this case reads:

> **Summary:** The original text in 1 Nephi 1:3 probably read according to the earliest textual sources ("I know that the record which I make to be true") because a similar yet even more awkward construction originally occurred in Moroni 4:1 ("we know that the matter to be true"); if

---

4. See Royal Skousen, "Conjectural Emendation in the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 187–231.

5. The full text of ATV, first edition, is available at the Interpreter Foundation, http://interpreterfoundation.org/books/volume-4-of-the-critical-text-of-the-book-of-mormon-analysis-of-textual-variants-of-the-book-of-mormon/.

1 Nephi 1:3 is to be revised, the *that* should be deleted in order to agree with the usage in 3 Nephi 5:18 ("I know the record which I make to be a just and a true record"). (1:58–59)

The second example occurs at Moroni 10:33, where the current text reads: "that ye become holy, without spot." Skousen notes that the comma was added in 1920 and wonders whether Joseph's original dictation might have been "wholly without spot," which would have sounded identical to the scribe taking dictation. (Skousen also names a student of his who suggested this possibility in 1991.) He notes that either reading makes sense in context and then looks for other *without* phrases in the Book of Mormon used adverbially or adjectivally and whether or not they are conjoined with the word *and,* since another possibility is that the original manuscript (no longer extant for these verses) may have read "holy and without spot." He also cites 16 instances from the King James Bible of adjectives conjoined with a *without* phrase, including two that are particularly close: Ephesians 1:4 reads "holy and without blame," and Ephesians 5:27 has "holy and without blemish." He finds yet another precedent in "pure and without spot" from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer.* Skousen observes that although there are adverbial uses of *wholly* elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, there are none that modify a prepositional phrase, and there is no evidence for scribes ever having mixed up *holy* and *wholly* in their copying (6:4100–04). After three and a half pages of detailed arguments, he concludes:

> **Summary:** Maintain the current reading Moroni 10:33: "that ye become holy / without spot"; this reading is found in all the extant sources; *wholly* is somewhat less appropriate than the current *holy*; an *and* between *holy* and *without spot* would be more consistent with other Book of Mormon usage as well as with two quotes in the King James Bible from the epistle to the Ephesians, but it is not necessary, providing that the comma from the 1920 LDS edition is maintained. (6:4104)

After a couple of hundred pages or so, readers can get a feel for the way Skousen argues about textual matters. Characteristically, his approach is comprehensive (in that he discusses every important variant), precise (in his abundant citations of evidence and examples), transparent (so that readers can follow his reasoning as he weighs alternatives; he also gives credit to everyone who has made suggestions), conservative (meaning that he generally follows the earliest reading unless it is both seriously problematic and there is a plausible way to explain how an error arose from a possible variant or emendation), and faithful (in

that he treats the Book of Mormon as a sacred text in which every word is potentially significant). Through the course of the six parts, Skousen analyzes 5,280 cases of variation (or potential variation) and then renders a judgment for each case. The results of those thousands of decisions constitute his reconstruction of the earliest text, which was published by Yale in 2009.

In working through ATV, I have found relatively little to disagree with, and even where there may be differences of opinion, the debate will generally be conducted on Skousen's terms, given the thoroughness of his analysis. Because he has tried to examine every issue from multiple perspectives, those who disagree will often simply assign different weight to the evidence he has adduced. To take one particularly disputed example, Skousen has suggested that the phrase "pleasing bar of God" at Jacob 6:13 and Moroni 10:34 should be emended to "pleading bar of God"—an expression for which he identifies very limited archaic legal usage. He asserts that "the word *pleasing* does not really work as a descriptive adjective for 'the bar of God.' For the righteous, it may well be pleasing, but not for the wicked." He notes that the phrase "bar of God," which occurs nine other times in the text, always has either a negative or a neutral connotation, and further suggests that Oliver Cowdery may have mistakenly written "pleasing bar" because he was unfamiliar with "pleading bar"; indeed Skousen offers several similar examples from Cowdery's transcribing (2:1087–92).[6]

Skousen makes a strong case, and I am convinced that "pleading bar" is a genuine possibility, but in the spirit of his usual conservativism, I do not regard the earliest reading as so problematic that it absolutely requires emendation. For my part, I would take up his observation that the judgment bar may be "pleasing" to some and not others and offer the parallel example of the "pleasing word of God," an expression that Jacob uses three times. Jacob describes God's word as something that both "healeth the wounded soul" (Jacob 2:8) and comes down with such "strictness" that "many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds" (2:35), yet Jacob is comfortable applying the adjective "pleasing" to it.[7] I would also point to Mormon 9:13, which states that at the resurrection, all people "shall

---

6. More extensive arguments are found in Skousen, "Conjectural Emendation," 201–14.

7. Similarly, at 2 Nephi 9:46 Jacob describes the final judgment as a "glorious day," even though the righteous and the wicked will face very different outcomes at that time.

come forth, both small and great, and all shall stand before his bar, being redeemed and loosed from this eternal band of death, which death is a temporal death." It seems that finding oneself at the bar of God, in a state of having been redeemed from "the eternal band of death," might be a pleasing circumstance regardless of what may follow. Or perhaps the judgment bar may be pleasing to God, rather than to humans, in that it allows him to manifest the full range of his justice and mercy. In any case, I do not find "pleasing bar of God" to be an impossible or incomprehensible construction.

Another point of mild disagreement comes right at the beginning of the second edition of ATV, where a reader wrote to Skousen wondering if Nephi's self-description as one who had been "born of goodly parents" might be a mistake for "born of godly parents" (full disclosure: I was that reader). Skousen examines the evidence for and against the proposed emendation. On the one hand, "goodly" does not exactly mean "good" (I would note that Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* gives three definitions: "being of a handsome form; beautiful; graceful," "pleasant; agreeable; desirable," and "bulky; swelling"—none of which obviously apply to Lehi and Sariah), and a search of *Early English Books Online* yields no instances of "goodly parents," but 1,185 occurrences of "godly parents," including forty passages with "born of godly parents," some of which date back to the seventeenth century. On the other hand, *goodly* more or less works (Skousen states that "the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides evidence that one archaic meaning for *goodly* was, in fact, 'good'"), and there are no examples of scribes ever mixing up *god* and *good*, so in the end he rejects the proposed emendation.[8] I agree with Skousen's final judgment—I do not think the evidence is strong enough to justify changing the received text— though I might quibble with some of his reasoning. The OED (which is ultimately more useful than Webster) never actually offers "good" as a definition for *goodly*, but it does list "virtuous," "excellent," and "fine" as archaic usages, so good enough. However, Skousen goes on to cite Hugh Nibley's suggestion that "goodly" in 1 Nephi 1:1 actually meant "wealthy" or "of elevated social status" (1:55). Since these definitions appear idiosyncratic to Nibley, with no precedents in the English language listed in the OED, I would rule them out of bounds. And I would similarly disagree with Skousen's insistence that the education provided to Nephi by

---

8. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants,* 2d ed., 1:55–56.

his "goodly parents" was secular rather than religious (the latter would better fit precedents for "godly parents"), since that distinction strikes me as anachronistic with regard to ancient literacy, especially when the only text Nephi ever cites is the brass plates, whose Egyptian script (Mosiah 1:4) he could read thanks to "the learning of [his] father," which included "the language of the Egyptians" (1 Ne. 1:1–2).

It is easy to see how such discussions, concerning numerous variants for every chapter in the Book of Mormon, might run to several thousand pages. Yet there are only a handful of instances, out of over five thousand, in which I would question Skousen's textual judgments (conjectural emendations are always the hardest calls). Nevertheless, the way he has organized his arguments in ATV invites readers to think along with him, and indeed several people—often ordinary Latter-day Saints rather than scholars—have suggested emendations that were plausible enough to warrant a write-up in either the first or second edition of ATV (Skousen is uncommonly generous in acknowledging the contributions of others to his project). Still, one difficulty, to my mind, inherent in the way that Skousen has structured his Critical Text Project, is that the final product of his research, his *Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text,* is presented without apparatus, that is, as a single running text without footnotes.[9] This means he had to make a binary, yes-or-no decision for every alternative he considered. In other critical editions, important alternatives and variant readings are listed at the bottom of each page, and in the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament*, the adopted readings are ranked A, B, C, or D, with "A" meaning that the text is virtually certain and "D" indicating that editors were almost evenly divided over which variant to adopt. With a similar apparatus, "born of godly parents" would not be adopted in the text proper but would appear in a footnote as a "possible" reading that is at least worth considering. (Would any early readers of the Book of Mormon have seen "goodly parents" as a mistake? Or a pun on a familiar phrase?) The combination of ATV with the *Earliest Text* allows Skousen to present much more textual analysis than would ever be possible in a critical edition, but a person would have to read through ATV to know which of Skousen's textual choices were based on a clear preponderance of the evidence

---

9. He does, however, provide an appendix listing the 719 variants he considered most significant, with a simple indication of which ones he accepted for the *Earliest Text.*

and which he struggled over, acknowledging that a particular variant was quite possible, perhaps even probable, but nevertheless maintaining the reading of the earliest extant source because it worked well enough.

So, enjoying the fruits of Skousen's labors, as presented in the *Earliest Text,* is no substitute for joining him on his journey of textual analysis, through the four thousand pages of ATV. I realize that grappling with the details of textual criticism and linguistic analysis may not be for everyone, but I would highly recommend the exercise for three reasons. First, there is pleasure in watching a dedicated, talented scholar at work, who loves the Book of Mormon as much as anyone has ever loved any book. When one compares the attention lavished by generations of scholars on the Greek and Roman classics, on the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, the New Testament and the Qur'an, or even some of the great works of English literature, the care that Latter-day Saints have given to their signature scripture—even though we believe that it is a revelation and a gift from God—has been rather pitiful. In my opinion, Royal Skousen's devoted attention to the text itself outweighs the contributions of Nibley and nearly everyone else who has published on the Book of Mormon (including many fine LDS scholars whom I know and admire).

Second, every few chapters there are remarkable, subtle insights that shed light on the Book of Mormon as a work of history, theology, and literature. For instance, at 1 Nephi 2:6, in a discussion of whether a word should be *tent* or *tents,* Skousen observes that a leader's "tent" is always in the singular in the Book of Mormon, except in four cases, where the text uses the name of a general to stand for his entire army, as at Alma 51:32: "and *Amalickiah* did pitch *his tents* in the borders on the beach" (1:77–78; Skousen is great at noticing patterns, as well as exceptions to patterns). For Mosiah 26:9, in an account of how young disruptive unbelievers were brought before Alma as the high priest, the original text read, "Alma *did know* concerning them, *for* there were many witnesses," and later was changed, through a complicated sequence, to "Alma *did not know* concerning them, *but* there were many witnesses." Alma's greater familiarity with the problem, according to the original text, makes his later discovery that his own son was involved all the more poignant (3:1536–37). Skousen also suggests emending Alma 1:24 from "their names were blotted out that they were *remembered* no more among the people of God" to ". . . they were *numbered* no more among the people of God." In this way, the verse becomes consistent

with four similar passages elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, but just as important is the implication that leaving the church does not necessarily mean being forgotten by its members (3:1643). In his discussion of whether 3 Nephi 19:24–25 should read "Jesus *beheld* them" (from the printer's manuscript) or "Jesus *blessed* them" (from the 1830 edition), Skousen, taking up a suggestion from David Calabro, notes the close connection between verses 24–25 and the famous priestly blessing of Numbers 6:22–27 (6:3574–76). Such examples of notable insights could be multiplied at great length.[10]

Third, through his ATV, Skousen can teach us how to read scripture both critically and faithfully. As we follow along, we can see what it means to imagine how a single word or punctuation mark might alter our understanding of a verse, or how a particular expression might fit into its narrative context or patterns of the text as a whole, or the importance of making sure that every word and verb form is accounted for in our interpretations. His extensive analysis may leave little unsaid with regard to textual matters, yet there is so much more that could be noticed and said about the Book of Mormon and its sacred message, if only we were reading more slowly and carefully. And as I mentioned earlier, because the entirety of the first edition of ATV is available online, this sort of intellectual and spiritual exercise is readily available to anyone with an internet connection. Skousen's ATV is a treasure of inestimable value for anyone who loves the Book of Mormon.

I have spent a fair amount of time on ATV because I am not aware of many reviews of the entire series since its completion in 2009. The question may be asked, however, whether a second edition is warranted just eight years later. As Skousen worked on parts 1–5 of the first edition, he noticed places where corrections or additions were needed and consequently included a lengthy section of supplementary notes at the end of part 6. Those have all been incorporated into the text of the second edition at the appropriate locations. He has also revised sixty of his original write-ups and added thirty-seven more that are entirely new. Most of the latter are suggestions from readers for changes to the text, and, following his customary conservatism, he has accepted less than

---

10. Perhaps the best introduction to ATV is Skousen's article "Some Textual Changes for a Scholarly Study of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 51, no. 4 (2012): 99–117, in which he provides thirty examples of the kinds of changes he suggests for the current text, with both justifications and implications.

a quarter of them.[11] (One of the most notable is a revision to 1 Nephi 19:20–21, which Skousen was persuaded to accept even though it meant giving up his previous interpretation of the passage as a Hebraistic conditional clause. It is always impressive when scholars are able to change their minds based on new arguments or when LDS scholars are willing to set aside possible examples of ancient Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon.) In the newest edition, Skousen has also been able to integrate his sequential textual analysis more closely with recent printings of the *Earliest Text* and with the grammatical analysis in the first two parts of volume 3, *The History of the Text: Grammatical Variation.* Furthermore, a second edition offered an opportunity to proof and correct the entire series, and I understand that he was particularly concerned about inaccuracies in the transcription of the 1907 vest pocket edition of the Book of Mormon used in his computerized collation.[12] In truth, however, readers will not notice much of a difference. Most of the changes are relatively minor, and the second edition is less than fifty pages longer than the first (out of some 4,100 pages). Yet Skousen is creating a corpus of textual analysis that will last for many generations to come, and I imagine that he is eager to get a final form into print. The second edition of ATV may be an exercise in perfectionism, but perfectionism in the service of scholarship, particularly when the subject is sacred scripture, is not a weakness.[13] Scholars will certainly want to use the newer edition right away; I fully expect that at some point it too will be made available online for all interested readers.

---

11. For readers using the first edition who are curious about where these new entries occur, they can be found at 1 Ne. 1:1, 8:31, 19:20–21; 2 Ne. 8:4, 9:30, 24:2, 25:3, 29:7, 29:9; Jacob 5:8, 7:19; Mosiah 7:18, 15:6–7, 15:11, 18:12, 21:23; Alma 1:15, 1:29, 13:12, 30:44–45, 34:30, 52:27, 56:27–28; Hel. 6:13, 12:2; 3 Ne. 21:8, 21:29; 4 Ne. title, 1:49; Morm. 5:20, 8:8, 9:11; Ether 3:2, 3:28, 12:7–8; and Moro. 3:1, 10:1–2. Unfortunately, the new entries are missing the concluding "summary" statements that were so useful in the first edition.

12. Royal Skousen, "Celebrating the New Edition of Royal Skousen's *Analysis of Textual Variants*" (lecture, Provo, Utah, April 12, 2017), http://interpreterfoundation.org/video-presentation-celebrating-the-new-edition-of-royal-skousens-analysis-of-textual-variants/. The discussion of the 1907 edition begins at about 24:30.

13. It is worth noting that the precision of the content is matched by the precision of the typesetting, done by Jonathan Saltzman. This is a massive, detailed, complicated undertaking for any printer, yet the design is consistently easy to use and pleasing to the eye, and the editing is extraordinarily exact. I have found only one typographical error in thousands of pages.

Grammatical Variation

One might think that establishing the earliest text of the Book of Mormon, in conjunction with a thorough analysis of textual variants, might be achievement enough for one scholarly career, but Skousen is continuing to move forward with volume 3 of the Critical Text Project: *The History of the Text.* This volume will comprise seven parts (again, each part is a folio-size book), as follows:

> Parts 1–2: *Grammatical Variation*
>
> Parts 3–4: *The Nature of the Original Language*
>
> Part 5: *Quotations from the King James Bible;* and *Spelling in the Manuscripts and Editions*
>
> Part 6: *The Transmission of the Text*
>
> Part 7: *Book of Mormon Textual Criticism*

The first two parts, *Grammatical Variation,* were published in 2016, and they are nothing short of astonishing. The level of detail and precision is a wonder to behold.

Skousen uses the term "grammatical variation" to refer to all the changes in the text over time that affected its grammar, which include several thousand minor adjustments made to its wording as copyists, typesetters, and editors attempted to bring the language of the Book of Mormon into conformance with contemporary standard English. This survey comes directly out of his electronic collation of the two Book of Mormon manuscripts and twenty significant published editions (which will eventually be published as volume 5 of the Critical Text Project); he keyed in brief notations for each of the grammatical variants he encountered, thus making it possible to run a program that could identify every instance of, say, changes to generic pronouns from singular to plural, or vice versa, to make them consistent within a single passage. In ATV, he usually dealt with these sorts of changes the first time they occurred and then promised that full discussions and complete lists of every instance in the text would be forthcoming in *Grammatical Variation.* This is exactly what he has produced, and the results are fascinating because one of the things believers and outsiders alike can agree upon is that the original language of the Book of Mormon was odd.

Linguists sometimes speak of "idiolects," that is, each individual's unique usage of grammar and vocabulary, in contrast with "dialects," which are shared by many people in a specific social class or region. The original text of the Book of Mormon might be thought of as having an

idiolect, since its patterns of usage are quite distinct from other books of the time (even those few that deliberately adopted archaic, King James–like diction), and there is some question as to how the language of the text relates to Joseph Smith's idiolect or to the dialectal usages that he might have grown up with in rural, nineteenth-century Vermont and New York. The first edition was full of constructions that struck many readers as ungrammatical. This was seen as something of an embarrassment, and for the second edition of 1837 Joseph himself undertook the most comprehensive revision of grammar in the history of the text. Skousen, however, is interested in the earliest version, as it was first dictated. His goal has not been to correct or explain, but rather to identify and categorize its grammatical features with as much rigor and precision as possible. This is very much a linguist's view of the Book of Mormon, and where ATV is fairly accessible to most educated readers, *Grammatical Variation* is much more specialized.

The two parts consist of sixty-eight sections, in alphabetical order, each devoted to a specific grammatical feature such as adverbs, conjoined verb phrases, displaced prepositional phrases, inflectional endings, modal verbs, past participles, pronominal determiners, split infinitives, subject-verb inversions, subjunctives, and subordinate conjunctions. (Be forewarned, Skousen writes lucidly and provides copious examples, but the linguistic terminology comes fast and furiously.) There are also sections devoted to linguistically significant words and phrases, including *behold, blessed,* the corrective *or,* the *do*-auxiliary, *had ought, in the which, much* versus *many, that, thereof, thou, which,* and *whosoever.* Over the course of nearly thirteen hundred pages, he identifies hundreds of distinct grammatical patterns, with tens of thousands of examples. The various topics are derived from editorial changes over the years, so they focus on areas in which the Book of Mormon idiolect differs from standard English, but *Grammatical Variation* includes so many topics that it provides something close to a systematic, descriptive grammar of the original text.

Readers can get a sense of what Skousen has done by turning to the section on *come to pass*, one of the most notorious features of Book of Mormon language. He notes that there are 1,494 instances of "come to pass" in the earliest text, including 47 occurrences that were deleted by Joseph Smith for the 1837 edition, which is interesting in itself. Yet twenty-six pages of detailed analysis follow. He observes that in 1,463 cases, the form is an initial expletive *it* followed by an extraposed clause (indicated by the letter "S"), and then he starts to categorize and

count—all the while providing examples. There are 1,004 occurrences of "come to pass + that S" and only two without *that.* He counts the number of times an adverbial phrase comes between *that* and S (with details about various types of adverbial phrases), the times when there is no *that* before the adverbial phrase, and the times when *that* appears both before and after the adverbial phrase. He further reproduces all 30 instances in the Book of Mormon in which the clause that follows "come to pass" is never completed (sometimes the topic shifts, but more often the thought is picked up by another "come to pass" statement in resumptive repetition) (1:149–56).

After his syntactic analysis comes a comprehensive enumeration of inflectional variation ("came to pass" vs. "did come to pass" vs. "shall come to pass," and so forth) and then a comparison of "come to pass" in the King James Bible, broken down into the same syntactic categories with over one hundred biblical examples. (It turns out that the majority of occurrences in the Bible are of the "adverb that S" form, in contrast with the Book of Mormon's predominant "that S" construction.) There is a discussion of "come to pass" usage in other early English Bibles, followed by a full accounting of every instance in which Joseph Smith deleted the phrase. Finally, in an uncharacteristic moment of lightheartedness, Skousen runs the numbers to test Mark Twain's quip that without "it came to pass," the Book of Mormon "would have been only a pamphlet." In fact, Skousen surmises, the deletion of every instance of the phrase would have reduced the 1830 edition by just fifteen pages (1:157–75).

This example is fairly typical for the sixty-eight entries in *Grammatical Variation.* There is always a thorough review of Book of Mormon usage and a full accounting of all the subsequent editing of the text, which is then often followed by comparisons to usage in the King James Bible and Early Modern English (hereafter EModE), that is, the English language from about 1500 to 1700.[14] The value of the first comparative mode is obvious—whether Joseph received inspiration that he then articulated to his scribes in his own words, or whether he read aloud

---

14. Standard EModE handbooks include Manfred Görlach, *Introduction to Early Modern English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), with numerous sample texts; Charles Barber, *Early Modern English,* rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); and Roger Lass, ed., *The Cambridge History of the English Language: Volume III: 1476–1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

a preexisting translation that he saw in the seer stone (the translation hypothesis that Skousen thinks best fits the evidence), whoever was ultimately responsible for the wording of the Book of Mormon was imitating the general style of the King James Bible and even incorporated several of its chapters nearly word for word.[15] Joseph was well acquainted with that seventeenth-century translation, as were the earliest readers of the Book of Mormon, who immediately recognized its scriptural ambitions. Consequently, it is helpful to note not only where the Bible and the Book of Mormon use similar expressions and constructions, but also where they differ. Part of the meaning of the Mormon scripture is conveyed in how it adapts and responds to the Old and New Testaments.

The utility of comparing Book of Mormon usage with EModE is less obvious. Several years ago, Skousen noticed a handful of Book of Mormon passages in which specific words made more sense if they were interpreted using definitions from EModE that were obsolete by Joseph Smith's era.[16] It was a curious finding. More recently, he has observed that many of the grammatical constructions that were considered nonstandard in Joseph's day have parallels in EModE. In some ways, this is not surprising. English grammar in the Early Modern Period was more diverse and less regularized than it was in the nineteenth century, and there are large databases of thousands of texts and hundreds of millions of words that are instantly searchable. Consequently, a good number of modern grammatical errors, such as those I see regularly in student papers, will yield hits in EModE. For instance, the earliest text of the Book of Mormon included a number of double negatives, a linguistic phenomenon that was common enough in Joseph's day to raise the ire of prescriptive grammarians. Multiple negation (the term that Skousen prefers) was much more acceptable in EModE, and there are many, many examples to be found, even in formal writing. This does not mean that people who used double negatives in nineteenth-century

---

15. On evidence for Joseph reading the original text to his scribes through the use of a seer stone, see Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins,* ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 61–93. I myself have been persuaded by his arguments on this matter, though questions regarding miracles will always remain open.

16. See, for example, his "The Archaic Vocabulary of the Book of Mormon," *Insights* 25, no. 5 (2005): 2–6; and *Earliest Text,* xxxvii–xxxix.

America (or even today) had a sophisticated knowledge or even a familiarity with EModE grammar, yet patterns of usage can be interesting, especially since, as Skousen has shown, the original text of the Book of Mormon was often rather consistent in its nonstandard grammatical constructions—most of which were edited out of later editions. Comparisons with EModE can sometimes help us make sense of nonstandard Book of Mormon grammar, and cases where we find nonbiblical constructions in the Book of Mormon that were rare in the nineteenth century but common in the seventeenth, or vice versa, might tell us something about the nature of the translation.

Skousen handles the description of Book of Mormon grammar and the history of its subsequent editing magnificently, and probably definitively. The observations on comparisons with the Bible and EModE, however, are not as systematic or as clear as they could be—sometimes they are buried under mountains of examples—and I regularly found myself wishing for the sort of concise summaries that were so prominent in ATV. A quick synopsis of discussions from *Grammatical Variation,* based on the earliest text of the Book of Mormon, might include the following (if I have understood Skousen correctly):

> **Adverbs without the *-ly* ending:** This adverbial form is common in both the Book of Mormon (BofM) and EModE (1:111–19).
>
> **As . . . therefore:** Though this construction appears 20 times in the BofM, it is uncommon in EModE (Skousen offers only a single example) (1:123–28).
>
> **Conjunctive repetition:** The BofM follows usage in the King James Version (KJV) rather than the underlying Hebrew or Greek (1:196–228).
>
> ***Do*-auxiliary:** The *do*-auxiliary (e.g., "did go" rather than "went") is much more common in the BofM than in the KJV, with rates comparable to English texts in the late 1500s (1:252–267).[17]

---

17. Skousen refers readers to Stanford Carmack's article "The Implications of Past-Tense Syntax in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 119–86. Carmack's approach is much more apologetic than Skousen's (as was appropriate for the venue), and he wants to argue that this feature of the Book of Mormon is strong evidence that Joseph Smith could not have written the text himself. It seems to me, however, that Carmack does not give adequate consideration to alternative hypotheses: for instance, Joseph may have picked up the *do*-auxiliary from the King James Bible and then overused it in

For to: Meaning "in order to," *for to* appears 15 times in the BofM, as well as various times in the Bible and EModE, but it was recognized as an improper dialectic usage in nineteenth-century New York (1:310–13).[18]

Had ought: This verb appears 29 times in the BofM; there is strong evidence for its dialectic usage in nineteenth-century New York and weak evidence in EModE (Skousen identifies just two examples) (1:351–60).

Hebraisms: Skousen deals with only those that involve BofM editing and offers a characteristically measured assessment, differentiating strong evidence for some non-KJV Hebraisms (for example, "if . . . and" constructions) from more ambiguous examples (1:361–408).

Inflectional endings: Nearly all the nonstandard, nonbiblical inflectional endings in the BofM (basically, the *-eth* and *-est* verb forms) can be found in EModE (1:455–97).

Negation: Negation (especially double negatives) is avoided in the KJV but present in both the BofM and EModE (1:558–88).

Past tense: As in several other entries, Skousen separates out major verbs, including "to do," for which there are EModE precedents for most BofM nonstandard usages except for "this he done," which appears 6 times in the earliest text (2:629–41).

Pronominal determiners: For example, "in them days" appears twice in the BofM and was considered an improper dialectic usage in the nineteenth century; however, pronominal determiners can be found in formal writing in EModE (2:700–67).

Resumptive repetition: The frequent occurrence of this construction in the BofM seems nearly unique, since it very rarely appears in the KJV (2:807–53).

---

an idiosyncratic way, just as he may have done with "it came to pass," "yea," and "behold," and that his quasi-archaic usage coincidentally happened to mirror rates from a particular half-century of EModE.

18. To his credit, although Skousen seems committed to the archaic nature of the language of the Book of Mormon, he nevertheless looks for evidence of nineteenth-century dialectic usages, including in prescriptive grammars of Joseph's day such as Samuel Kirkham's *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures*, which was used by Joseph and other members of the Kirtland School of the Prophets in 1835–36 (*Grammatical Variation*, 311, 352).

Shew: *Shew* occurs 159 times in the BofM, along with 8 instances of *show,* while the KJV only has *shew*; the BofM preference for *shew* over *show* best matches English usage from around 1580, while its preference for *shewn* over *shewed* better fits usage in the 1700s (2:854–60).

Subject-verb agreement: Standard forms predominate in the BofM, but there are still numerous instances of disagreement, particularly in the third person, which can often be matched by examples from EModE (2:880–915).

Subjunctive: Instances of the subjunctive in the BofM usually follow KJV usage (2:945–1017).

Thereof: Though *thereof* is frequent in both the KJV and the BofM, in the Bible the word always means "of it" and never "of them" or "of him," as occasionally happens in the BofM and EModE (2:1138–43).

Thou: Unlike the KJV, which maintains a distinction between *thou/ thee* and *ye/you* forms depending on whether the referent is singular or plural, the BofM frequently mixes them, sometimes even within the same passage;[19] in addition, "the use of the *th-* pronouns to refer to small groups of individuals . . . may be unique to the Book of Mormon text" (2:1177).

Toward: The BofM strongly prefers *towards* over *toward,* even though the former never appears in the KJV (2:1180–87).

This, of course, is a very inadequate summary, though it offers a sampling of the observations scattered throughout the two parts of *Grammatical Variation.* I hope that parts 3 and 4 of volume 3, titled *The Nature of the Original Language,* will include not only a systematic review of the ways in which the grammar of the Book of Mormon resembles that of the King James Bible and nonbiblical EModE, but also, just as importantly, where there are significant differences. The structure of *Grammatical Variation,* which starts with the Book of Mormon text and then looks for parallels with the Bible and EModE, guarantees that similarities are highlighted; I would be interested in the explicit identification of

---

19. Linguists generally don't put much stock in "proper" versus "improper" grammar, but this is one aspect of the Book of Mormon translation that is deficient in comparison to the King James Bible. It would have been very helpful to modern readers and translators to know in every instance whether the people being spoken to were singular or plural.

characteristic features of EModE that are *not* replicated in the Mormon scripture (such as the frequent use of the demonstrative pronoun *yon/yonder*). Already I have seen online discussions in which Latter-day Saints excitedly assert that the Book of Mormon is an EModE text (and thus could not have been written by Joseph Smith), as if it were lifted straight from the seventeenth century. This does not seem right to me. It may share some syntactic patterns, and there are a few words that make more sense if they are read with obsolete meanings, but most people would have little trouble differentiating a passage from the Book of Mormon with one from a book actually written in the Early Modern Period. It seems more likely that the language of the Book of Mormon is something of a hybrid, combining linguistic features of modern English and EModE (however one might explain that), while at the same time incorporating hundreds of distinct phrases from both the Old and New Testaments, starting with 1 Nephi (however one might explain that), and also bringing in nonbiblical expressions that were commonly used in the nineteenth century (however one might explain that).[20] A comprehensive survey of the last two components are beyond the scope of Skousen's Critical Text Project, yet they are nevertheless integral to the language of the Book of Mormon, along with whatever elements of grammar and phrasing may be original with, or unique to, the new scripture.

This brings us to the two essays at the beginning of *Grammatical Variation.* The first, "Editing the Nonstandard Grammar in the Book of Mormon," by Skousen, examines Joseph Smith's editing for the 1837

---

20. Examples of the latter, through the first sixty-five pages of the 1830 edition, would include "first parents," "condescension of God," "temporally and spiritually," "day(s) of probation," "final state," "watery grave," "God of nature," "working(s) in/of the Spirit," "land of liberty," "cold and silent grave," "infinite goodness," "instrument in the hands of God," "fall of man," "sacrifice for sin," "miserable forever," and "Great Mediator." In recent lectures, Skousen has appeared eager to find examples of such phrases in EModE, and indeed most of these do occur as early as the seventeenth century, yet the fact that they were widely familiar in Joseph Smith's time is not an inconsequential aspect of the language of the Book of Mormon and how it would have been understood and received by its first readers. A text that was revealed by God in 1829 in a fairly exact form could just as easily have included contemporary phrases as well as archaic, nonstandard syntax from several centuries earlier. See Royal Skousen and Stan Carmack, "Editing Out the 'Bad Grammar' in the Book of Mormon" (lecture, Provo, Utah, April 6, 2016), transcript available at http://interpreterfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/grammatical-variation.pdf; see 11–13.

edition and is everything one might wish—it is clear, concise, and thorough, as it makes some important observations about Joseph's methods and results. The second essay, "The Nature of the Nonstandard English in the Book of Mormon," by Skousen's collaborator for this volume, Stanford Carmack, seems a little out of place. Carmack is a talented linguist and an indefatigable researcher; indeed, his contributions are acknowledged by Skousen throughout the two parts of *Grammatical Variation.* Yet the tone of his essay, adapted from an article previously published in the *Interpreter,*[21] is more apologetic than is typical for Skousen's work. There is certainly a time and a place for apologetics, and Carmack is a thoughtful practitioner of the genre, but this essay fits awkwardly into the Critical Text Project, which has generally been evenhanded in its presentation of alternative points of view and its assessment of evidence.[22] Carmack confidently asserts that "the quality of English in the book is excellent and even sophisticated" (1:46)—something that is not obvious even to those who have read through *Grammatical Variation*—and he seems to go beyond the evidence when he claims that "the language of the Book of Mormon is typical Early Modern English in nearly all instances" (1:47), or even that "it is, in large part, an Early Modern English text" (1:48). His quick presentation of two dozen items of similarity might strike some as cherry-picking, in contrast to the methodical, comprehensive analysis of Book of Mormon grammar that follows (though at one point he does acknowledge that "the Book of Mormon functions like an early 19th-century text in its preference for *have*" [1:73]). Carmack's essay is provocative and significant, and it works well enough at the beginning of *Grammatical Variation* as an attention-grabbing opener, a reminder that long-held assumptions may not be adequate, and as a preview of coming attractions, but I am looking forward to a more nuanced, balanced, and detailed overview in the next two parts of volume 3.

As a book reviewer, it is my job to point out both strengths and weakness, but I don't want the latter to detract from my overall assessment of the work. There has never been anything like *Grammatical Variation* in the history of Mormonism. Through an enormous expenditure of

---

21. See Stanford Carmack, "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar," *Interpreter* 11 (2014): 209–62.

22. My use of the term "apologetic" is not meant to be disparaging. My own scholarly work on the Book of Mormon often has an apologetic bent to it.

time and effort, and painstakingly written to exacting standards, Skousen has produced a full, nonjudgmental, descriptive grammar of the Book of Mormon, making it one of the most thoroughly linguistically analyzed books in the world. In reaching for comparisons, most of what comes to mind are groundbreaking works of grammatical scholarship from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—volumes such as Wilhelm Gesenius's Old Testament–based *Hebrew Grammar* (1813, in German), William Wright's *A Grammar of the Arabic Language,* which gives considerable attention to the Qur'an (1862), D. B. Monro's *A Grammar of the Homeric Dialect* (1882), Friedrich Blass's *Grammar of New Testament Greek* (1896, in German), Henry St. John Thackeray's *A Grammar of the Old Testament in Greek* (1909), A. A. Macdonell's *Vedic Grammar* (1910), and much more recently, N. F. Blake's three-hundred-page *A Grammar of Shakespeare's Language* (2002). Not surprisingly, the works of literature thought worthy of comprehensive grammatical analysis are generally sacred texts, and it is striking to see the Book of Mormon in that company. There are enough Christians, Muslims, and Hindus that sooner or later someone would have produced a modern, descriptive grammar of their scripture. I'm not sure this is the case for Mormonism. It is always good for Latter-day Saints to remember that we are a tiny minority religion on the world stage, and if it weren't for Royal Skousen—the right person, at the right time, with the right temperament—I'm not sure that something like *Grammatical Variation* would have ever come about.

This is even more true for the Critical Text Project as a whole. When completed, this multidecade, multivolume endeavor will offer valuable data for trying to understand the nature of the Book of Mormon as a translation, but for the most part Skousen has wisely refrained from explanations and speculations about what Joseph Smith (or God) could or could not have done, or whether or not the text had divine origins.[23]

---

23. Ironically, a First Presidency letter reprinted in the April 1993 *Ensign* and later incorporated into *Handbook 2* (at 21.1.8) discouraged contemporary English versions of the Book of Mormon with the observation that "when a sacred text is translated into another language or rewritten into more familiar language, there are substantial risks that this process may introduce doctrinal errors or obscure evidence of its ancient origin." As Skousen has definitively demonstrated, our current official English edition is itself a modern rewriting of the text, and any serious investigation of the origins of the Book of Mormon has to start with his *Earliest Text.*

What I want from the Critical Text Project is the earliest text (as reconstructed through textual scholarship), a full accounting of later editing, a descriptive grammar for the earliest version, and a history of the process by which the book came into being—the sorts of things that all readers, regardless of religious commitment, can agree upon. Anything more would be a task for theology as well as philology. (How could it be otherwise for a text that claims to have been translated by a miracle?)

Other than Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, who are in a class unto themselves, Royal Skousen has done more to establish, correct, and elucidate the text of the Book of Mormon than anyone else in the history of the Church, including the first typesetter, John Gilbert; later editors such as Orson Pratt or James E. Talmage; and any number of commentators. The Critical Text Project is truly a labor of love and devotion, a monumental achievement for which Skousen deserves whatever is the Mormon equivalent of the Presidential Medal of Freedom (a profile in the *Ensign*? effusive praise from the pulpit at general conference? an honorary degree from BYU?). But the best tribute of all would be to have some of the findings from his scholarship incorporated into the next official edition of the Book of Mormon, where they could bless the lives of generations to come. I like to think that Moroni himself is looking forward to meeting Royal "before the pleasing [pleading?] bar of the great Jehovah" (Moro. 10:34).

Grant Hardy (PhD, Yale University) is a professor of history and religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. He has authored *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian's Conquest of History*; *The Establishment of the Han Empire and Imperial China*; and *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide.* He also edited *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* and coedited volume one of the *Oxford History of Historical Writing.*