

The Original Book of Mormon Transcript

Royal Skousen

Title Page "If there be fault it be the mistake of men; wherefore condemn not the things of God."

The last of the plates of Mormon was the Title Page. It asks readers to understand that "if there be fault [in the Book of Mormon] it be the mistake of men." So read the Title Page in the June 1829 copyright application, the Printer's Manuscript, and the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Although studies have verified, again and again, the precision and accuracy of the Book of Mormon, Moroni's statement allowed for the possibility of error in the human aspects of writing, abridging, inscribing, translating, transcribing, and publishing.

Typical of the minor changes made in the Book of Mormon through its various printings, Joseph Smith in the 1837 edition changed this statement to read, "If there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God." And it has been printed this way ever since.

From 1984 to 1987, F.A.R.M.S. published a three-volume text of the Book of Mormon showing the numerous but mostly inconsequential changes in the various editions. Recently Royal Skousen has been directing much further work on the Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, with the assistance of F.A.R.M.S.

Since the Original Manuscript was written under difficult circumstances, it was not always neat. A second copy was also needed to protect against loss. Accordingly, after the translation was finished, Oliver Cowdery copied the entire Book of Mormon onto a second manuscript, known today as the Printer's Manuscript. From the Printer's Manuscript, the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon was typeset. All but one line of the Printer's Manuscript has survived (it is in the archives of the RLDS Church in Independence, Missouri). However, only about twenty-five percent of the Original Manuscript still exists (most of it in the LDS Church archives in Salt Lake City). The remainder of the Original Manuscript was either destroyed as it lay in the Nauvoo House cornerstone or was lost during the nineteenth century after being taken from the cornerstone.

However, with computers to tabulate exact comparisons, and with access to more legible copies of the Original Manuscript fragments and the Printer's Manuscript, a more thorough comparison of these manuscripts and the key editions of the Book of Mormon can be made. The study so far is yielding a deeper appreciation of the Original Manuscript.

When Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon in the spring of 1829, he dictated the text line by line. An examination of the Original Manuscript reveals that Joseph Smith, as he translated, apparently never went back to cross out, revise, or modify. The manuscript pages contain the words written by Joseph's scribes (primarily Oliver Cowdery) as the Prophet spoke the translation.

Several dozen differences between the Original Manuscript and the Printer's Manuscript, never before noted, have been detected. For example, Zenock is spelled "Zench" in the Original Manuscript (this spelling compares with that of Enoch). In Alma 51:15, the Original Manuscript reports that Moroni sent a petition to the governor "desiring that he should *heed* it." The 1830 edition typeset this phrase as "desiring that he should *read* it." In Alma 54:17, the Original Manuscript asserted that the Lamanites claimed that the government "*rightfully* belonged unto

them.” In the Printer’s Manuscript, this word became “*rightly*.” In other instances, “pressing their way” became “feeling their way” (1 Nephi 8:31), a “were” became a “was” (1 Nephi 13:12), and a “shall” became a “should” (1 Nephi 17:50). “Heard and seen” became “seen and heard” (1 Nephi 20:6), and the “poorer class of the people” became the “poor class of people” (Alma 32:2).

Analyzing the changes yields some important observations about the manuscripts:

1. The differences between the Original Manuscript and the Printer’s Manuscript are few. Only about one difference per manuscript page exists—far fewer than one might have expected.
2. The differences between the Printer’s Manuscript and the Original Manuscript are minor, and most of the errors are natural transcription errors. The Printer’s Manuscript shows no sign of any conscious editing on Oliver Cowdery’s part. These manuscripts show that he was careful to reproduce exactly what had been hurriedly written in the Original Manuscript.
3. As good as the Printer’s Manuscript is, the Original Manuscript is even better. Of the thirty-seven differences in transcription noted so far, seventeen show that the reading in the Printer’s Manuscript became more awkward or grammatically improper or unusual. In only seven cases was the Original Manuscript harder to understand, due for example to atypical spellings or awkward grammar (like Hebraisms).
4. Surprisingly, the copying errors in the Printer’s Manuscript tend to make the text shorter rather than longer. Of the thirty-seven differences, only two changed a shorter word to a longer one, while in seven cases a longer word was contracted to a shorter one. This is intriguing because people working with biblical manuscripts generally assume that texts tend to grow as scribal transmission changes them. The experience of Oliver Cowdery manifests the opposite tendency.

Above all, close examination of these manuscripts yields solid evidence that Oliver Cowdery was true to his calling as a scribe. Though much of the Original Manuscript has not survived, we can reasonably estimate that Oliver copied the entire Book of Mormon onto the Printer’s Manuscript with only about 140 differences—all of them apparently simple slips of the hand or eye. Considering the task of writing with a quill pen and the magnitude of the labor, the accuracy of Oliver’s transcription seems almost phenomenal.

Based on research by Royal Skousen, December 1988. Work on the Book of Mormon manuscripts continues. For the latest detailed report, see Royal Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30 (Winter 1990): 41-69. For information about the more recent discovery of several fragments of the Original Manuscript, see the F.A.R.M.S. newsletter, *Insights* (January 1991).