

Fragments of Original Manuscript Discovered

“And after having received the record of the Nephites, yea, even my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., might have power to translate through the mercy of God, by the power of God, the Book of Mormon.” (D&C 1:29)

For more than ten years, Royal Skousen has been studying the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Undoubtedly one of the most significant accomplishments in his work was the 1991 discovery, conservation, and photography of a collection of a large number of fragments from the original manuscript.

In 1882, when Lewis Bidamon opened the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, he discovered that the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith himself had placed in the cornerstone, was mostly destroyed by water seepage. Bidamon handed out the better-preserved portions of the manuscript (between 25–30 percent of the text), but he apparently kept for himself some smaller fragments.

In 1937, Wilford Wood of Bountiful, Utah, purchased these fragments from Charles Bidamon of Wilmette, Illinois. At Wood’s death these fragments were passed on to his family. In the summer of 1991, Skousen, following a trail of published references to the fragments, was able to view the fragments and then persuade the family to have them conserved and photographed.

The condition of the fragments posed serious problems. They were stuck together in a 3 x 6 x 1 inch lump. Skousen enlisted the help of conservators at the BYU Library (Robert Espinosa, Cathy Bell, and Pam Barrios) to unravel and press the fragments. David Hawkinson, photographer for BYU’s Museum of Art, experimented with different methods for photographing the fragments to bring out the very faint handwriting, finally succeeding with ultraviolet reflected photography.

From the resulting photos, Skousen was able to read enough to identify the six different places (covering parts of fifty-eight pages) in the original manuscript from which the fragments come: 2 Nephi 5–9, 2 Nephi 23–25, 2 Nephi 33 to Jacob 4, Jacob 5 to Enos 1, Helaman 13 to 3 Nephi 4, and Ether 3–15. Skousen has continued to work from the photographs to identify and locate the placement of all but the smallest fragments.

The main purpose of this project is to produce a critical text of the Book of Mormon—a re-creation of the original English text (as far as it can be determined) and a complete description of the substantive changes that have occurred in the text. To accomplish this, Skousen has carefully and extensively examined the original manuscript (O) and the printer’s manuscript (P); created electronic versions of O, P, and twenty significant editions of the Book of Mormon; compared these by computer to discover changes; and checked all variants found by computer analysis against the actual text copies. Ultimately, FARMS hopes to publish five volumes: (1) a facsimile transcript of the existing portions of O; (2) a facsimile transcript of P; (3) a history of the text; (4) the changes the text has undergone; and (5) the critical text itself.

The result will be an invaluable tool for students of the Book of Mormon. Not only will it provide the best information on the original and printer’s manuscripts, but it will also shed light on the process of translation and publication.

One of the most important findings of the project has been the identification of some previously unknown changes in the text of the Book of Mormon, most of them made when P was copied from O. Some of the other important

discoveries are: (1) for seventy-two pages of P, the 1830 edition was typeset directly from O instead of P; (2) two sheets from the University of Chicago (covering Alma 3–5) are probably a forgery; (3) there is direct evidence that Joseph spelled out Book of Mormon names for his scribes on the first occurrence and apparently again later when requested; (4) a small part of O is in Joseph's own handwriting (twenty-eight words in Alma 45); and (5) the word chapter and the added chapter numbers were not part of the original text of the Book of Mormon but instead correspond to what Joseph Smith saw as breaks in the text.

From 1984 to 1987, FARMS published the first-ever critical text of the Book of Mormon (three volumes), which includes information on the ancient form of the text. Skousen's project focuses on recovering the English translation that Joseph Smith dictated.

Financial and other support for this continuing project has come from BYU, FARMS, the Keter Foundation, the LDS and RLDS churches (which have made possible work on O and P), and the Wilford Wood Foundation, as well as from a host of individuals.

Research by Royal Skousen, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (January 1992): 2.