Recovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: An Interim Review

The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing

Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records
Salt Lake City, Utah

First Edition

Palmyra, New York

Translation is completed. Printer's manuscript prepared.

English Editions of the Book of Mormon

1823
1827
1829
1830
1837
1840
1841
1842
1849
1852
1858
1874
1879
1892
1905
1907
1911
1953
1981

1830
Joseph receives the plates from Moroni.

Kirtland, Ohio
Liverpool, England
Liverpool, England
New York City (Wright)
Plano, Illinois (RLDS)
Salt Lake City, Utah
Liverpool, England
Lamoni, Iowa (RLDS)
Chicago, Illinois
Salt Lake City, Utah
Independence, Missouri (RLDS)

1823
First visit of Moroni to Joseph Smith. Joseph views the plates in the Hill Cumorah.

ON THE COVER: Photo montage by Bjorn Pendleton. Photography by Mark Philbrick.
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THE EDITOR’S NOTEBOOK

Only rarely does one witness a truly monumental effort to shed light on an important document. The newly named Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship is pleased to bring notice to this kind of study in the pages of its Journal. Such is the case with Royal Skousen’s work on the text of the Book of Mormon. Published so far in six massive tomes, with more to come, Skousen’s meticulous scholarship has set out in typescript fashion the verses that remain from the original manuscript written by scribes at Joseph Smith’s dictation, in one volume, and the entire printer’s manuscript that was copied from the original for the printer’s use, in two. Paired with these are his voluminous yet painstakingly careful reviews of the variant readings that have made their way into the text throughout the printing history of the Book of Mormon in English. To date, three of six planned parts in this long study of variants have seen the light of day.

Because of this project’s historic significance, the editors of the Journal invited a bevy of scholars, representing different disciplines and points of view, to review Skousen’s Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10, published by FARMS in July 2004. After our invitation was accepted by five blue-ribbon scholars, part 2 of Skousen’s Analysis appeared (in July 2005), covering the text from 2 Nephi 11 through Mosiah 16. Our reviewers have limited themselves to part 1, but their astute observations about Skousen’s efforts most certainly apply to parts 2 and 3 and the volumes that will follow.

To assist with coordinating the five reviews and determining how best to present them in the Journal, the editors engaged the skills of Dr. M. Gerald Bradford, associate executive director of the Maxwell Institute and formerly an associate editor of the Journal. He has brought his usual superb abilities to the task. With his able assistance, we present the resulting reviews, which take very dissimilar angles when engaging Skousen’s work. To say the least, the character of this issue is very different from that of any other.

Gracing these pages are two more studies, each with a significant viewpoint. Robert Rees’s piece keeps the spotlight on the Book of Mormon in modern times. His interest has to do with the claim that, in dictating the text, Joseph Smith was simply engaging in “automatic writing,” a phenomenon documented in a number of clinical studies wherein a person seems to be almost captured by some beyond-consciousness force or personality that inspires a stream of insight that the person does not possess naturally. Dr. Rees deftly presses this view to see whether it discloses anything about Joseph Smith’s experience in translating the plates, and after shaking and wringing it thoroughly, he finds that the Prophet’s own explanation of his experience satisfies the evidence much more tightly than does any claim of automatic writing.

Steven Olsen comes to the pages of the Journal for the first time. He engages a broad question about the influences controlling the historical narrative of the Book of Mormon. What was guiding Mormon as he selected materials to add to his story? Is the steering principle, or set of principles, discoverable? What is the relationship between Mormon’s framework for his account and its content? With a refined sense developed through years of working with original historical materials, Dr. Olsen bends his best efforts to identifying the motives that lie behind Mormon’s presentation.

As in the past, the Journal remains dependent on and grateful for authors who have willingly brought their skills to bear on the Book of Mormon, whose pages continue to yield treasures to the patient, observant researcher.
Oliver Cowdery served as scribe while Joseph dictated from the plates.
HAVING EXHAUSTED THE MORE BIZARRE and byzantine explanations of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (written by Joseph Smith, plagiarized from Solomon Spaulding or Ethan Smith, written by Oliver Cowdery or Sidney Rigdon, dictated under the spell of epileptic seizures, etc.), some naturalist critics have postulated what appears to be a more rational explanation—it was the product of “automatic writing.” That is, by some mysterious process, “psychic forces,” “angelic voices,” “discarnate personalities,” “goddesses of wisdom,” or other sources dictate a rapid and voluminous flow of words that somehow turns out to be coherent, inspiring, and often amazing in its brilliance and inclusion of esoteric facts, some of which may be beyond the author’s knowledge. In this paper I examine the proposition that the Book of Mormon can be explained as a product of automatic writing.

Automatic writing, also called at times “spirit writing,” “psychography,” “abnormal writing,” “direct writing,” “trance writing,” and “independent writing,” is a term used to explain a self-induced flow of language from the unconscious or a form of writing the source of which supposedly comes from outside the conscious or subconscious mind of the person receiving the communication. In other words, the “author” is merely a conduit for some other intelligence, an amanuensis for ideas and expressions from another source. This latter definition is the one addressed in this paper.

Claims about the existence of automatic writing have existed since at least the 19th century, although some contend that “records of its occurrence are found in the most ancient works on the subject [of psychic phenomena], and it was perfectly familiar to those early and mediaeval students of occult phenomena whose researches throw so much light on that which we now find so perplexing.”

Automatic writing of this kind is normally classified as paranormal.

Challenges of Evaluating Automatic Writing

One problem with exploring this phenomenon is that it covers such a wide array of experiences. Some human “conduits” of communications from another realm use Ouija boards on which the communication is spelled out letter by letter; others use crystals or stones in which words and sentences appear; and still others merely listen to, see, or understand the messages being sent (sometimes in visions, dreams, or trance states). Scribes for these communications may use pens (sometimes writing in shorthand), typewriters, or computers to quickly record what is being dictated or revealed; or they may dictate messages to a recording device. Some communications take place during a single period
with a flurry of “communication”; others, like *A Course in Miracles* or *The Urantia Book*, which are well known to adherents of automatic writing, take place over a period of years.

Complicating the matter is the fact that the communications claim to come from a wide and unusual (and in some instances even strange) array of personalities. These include historic figures like William James and Oscar Wilde; unknown personalities like Patience Worth, a 17th-century English Quaker; creatures from other planets like “an Orvonton Divine Counselor, chief of the corps of superuniverse personalities,” who revealed the Urantia (earth) chronicles; previously unknown prophets from the past like Tahkamenon, Seth, and Levi; and even Jesus Christ.

The task of evaluating these various communications is even more complicated and challenging because some contradict others. The portrayal in Patience Worth’s *The Sorry Tale* (hailed by some contemporary critics as a “fifth gospel”) of the last days of Christ along the lines presented in the New Testament is contradicted by *A Course in Miracles*. The latter claims to have been dictated by Christ himself, yet it rejects the central Christian doctrines of the atonement, crucifixion, and resurrection, a position that is in turn at variance with *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, an account of the “lost” 18 years of Christ’s life that the “author” (Levi Dowling) also claimed was dictated to him by Jesus Christ. While the account of Christ’s life in *The Urantia Book*, as “supplied by a secondary midwayer who was onetime assigned to the superhuman watchcare of the Apostle Andrew,” is essentially the portrayal of Christ that one finds in the Gospels, it contradicts that original account in some important particulars, including the claim that Christ’s...
physical body was not resurrected but rather that he came forth out of the sealed tomb “in the very likeness of the morontia personalities of those who, as resurrected morontia ascendant beings, emerge from the resurrection halls of the first mansion world of this local system of Satania.” The problem becomes even more challenging if one includes in the category of automatic writing the account of Jesus Christ found in the Book of Mormon.

Skeptics of psychic experiences, including automatic writing, tend to explain such phenomena as clever frauds, unconscious processes, or “dissociation,” which the dictionary defines as “the separation of whole segments of the personality (as in multiple personality disorder) or of discrete mental processes (as in the schizophrenias) from the mainstream of consciousness or of behavior.” In other words, these communications are produced as conscious deceptions, unconscious delusions, or subconscious dissociations.

As one examines the wide range of texts claimed to have been received through the process of automatic recording of communication from another realm, it is difficult, if not impossible, to conclude that all such communications are authentic and legitimate. This is an arena in which some writers of automatic texts seem to record information from their subconscious memories and in which magicians and others have used trickery or manipulated data to produce the illusion of automatic writing.

While some such phenomena can be explained as the skeptics suggest, other phenomena apparently cannot. What, for example, does one make of the reported cases in which the communicant begins conversing in a language that, although unknown to the medium or scribe, is recorded with linguistic precision? Examples include communications in a variety of languages, including Greek, Welsh, Hungarian, and, in one of the most interesting cases, a Chinese dialect not spoken in China for centuries. As an observer of this last case, Dr. Neville Whymant, lecturer in Chinese at Oxford University, reported, “The Chinese to which we were now listening was as dead colloquially as Sanskrit or Latin.” To test the authenticity of the speaker, who identified himself as Confucius, Dr. Whymant recited the first and only line he knew of an obscure and difficult ancient Chinese poem and asked its meaning. He reports, “The voice took up the poem

There are other instances in which the medium who was the conduit of the automatic writing performed tasks that seem impossible to explain as the result of conscious, unconscious, or subconscious processes. That is, these individuals received historical facts and used linguistic styles that were not available in their information environment, and they expressed them in language and forms that were far beyond their expressive talents. One of the intriguing and most widely studied automatic writers was Pearl Curran, a St. Louis, Missouri, housewife who claimed to have received an enormous volume of material from a spirit personage over a 10-year period. According to Curran, the personage identified herself as Patience Worth and said she had lived in 17th-century England.
It is interesting to speculate about the possibility of a variety of communications coming from beyond the veil—some inspired and some not, some truthful and some not, some rational and some not. That is, since mortals, having free will, can communicate with one another in ways that are manipulative and deceitful as well as in ways that are open and truthful, since communications range from the brilliant to the dull and from the clear to the incoherent, and since they express conscious as well as unconscious material, might it not be possible that those in the spirit world can communicate with the living in the same ways? This runs counter to our general assumption about the spirit world, but since “whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life . . . will rise with us in the resurrection” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:18), then it may also be that other aspects of our personality and character follow us into the next world and influence our communication with the living, if indeed such communications are possible.

**Asserting a Connection**

What if anything does all of this have to do with the Book of Mormon? In an article entitled “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon,” Scott C. Dunn argues that the Book of Mormon is an example of automatic writing. He contends that “a number of parallels exist between Joseph Smith’s production of scripture and instances of automatic writing.” He uses the case of Pearl Curran to make his point. Curran claimed to receive communications from Patience Worth through use of a Ouija board, communications that she in turn dictated to various scribes. One of the most curious aspects of these communications is that they were given, Dunn writes, in “an antique and archaic figurativeness,” in an amalgam of dialects from earlier English periods, and in a diction that was 90 percent Anglo-Saxon (as compared to 42 percent for the Declaration of Independence). According to linguistic experts, the dictated text contained no modernisms. Over the decade of these communications, Curran recorded history, fiction, poetry, proverbs, and prayers. Those who knew her intimately and those who studied her carefully, including some of the leading psychologists and literary and linguistic scholars of the time, were convinced that there was nothing in Curran’s background, study, or experience that could account for this material.

Dunn compares Curran’s experience to that of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon: “Like believers in the Book of Mormon, followers of Patience Worth adduced linguistic evidence to show that the writing dictated through Pearl Curran did indeed belong to antiquity. Although some of the language was more ungrammatical than archaic [which, by the way, one might expect of a
person of Patience Worth’s purported education and background], there appear to be occasional uses of genuinely obsolete English words which Curran apparently could not have known.” Dunn continues, “Another startling thing about the works attributed to Patience Worth is their accuracy on factual details that Curran apparently could not have known, a defense often applied to writings given through Joseph Smith.”

Extending his argument, Dunn writes, “Like Joseph Smith, Pearl Curran appears to have lacked the education necessary to produce such works... Just as Joseph Smith eventually began to dictate revelations without the aid of a seer stone, so Curran began to dictate the words of Patience Worth without any physical object. Curran ‘simply saw the pictures and the words in her head and called them out, as coming from the hand of Patience Worth.’” According to Dunn, “Pearl Curran is like Joseph Smith in still another way: for both, available evidence militates against the likelihood of conscious fraud.”

Dunn then asks, “But beyond these general parallels to the experience of automatic writers, what is the evidence that Joseph Smith’s translation is an example of this phenomenon?” Dunn’s answer: “To begin with, the content of automatic texts is often similar to that of the Book of Mormon: Examples include multiple authorship, use of archaic language, accounts of bygone historical figures, accurate descriptions of times and places apparently unfamiliar to the writer, narratives with well-developed characters and plot, accounts of various ministries of Jesus Christ, poetics, occasionally impressive literary quality, doctrinal, theological, and cosmological discussions, and even discourses by deity.”

Dunn also argues that the manner in which the Book of Mormon was produced “bears strong resemblance to the process of automatic writing,” including “the speed and ease with which Smith worked” on his translation. After countering the arguments of some critics who feel the Book of Mormon is not a good example of automatic writing, Dunn concludes, “It is clear that Smith’s translation experience fits comfortably within the larger world of scrying, channeling, and automatic writing. Indeed, the automatic processes... provide the best model for understanding the translation of the Book of Mormon.”

The Extent of Common Ground

To what extent are Dunn’s observations accurate? To begin with, if one takes all of the texts that might fit into the category of automatic writing, a great number of books, many of which make no claim to have been written or dictated by anyone other than the author, might also be said to have content similar to automatic texts. Indeed, the works identified as automatic texts have very little in common with one another. They range from the absurd to the inspired, from the mundane to the esoteric, from short story to voluminous chronicle, from realistic narrative to what could best be described as speculative fiction. And their styles are as varied as their subject matter. So while it may be true that the Book of Mormon “fits comfortably within the larger world of... automatic writing,” it also fits comfortably within the larger world of narrative fiction and the narrower world of sacred literature.

It is surprising that Dunn seems to take at face value the claims of other automatic scribes about the source of their manuscripts but doesn’t seem to accept Joseph Smith’s own account of his sources as valid. That is, if Dunn uncritically accepts the witness of writers of automatic texts regarding the processes by which they received their material, why question the source Joseph Smith claimed for the Book of Mormon? Joseph was clear and specific about the manner in which he received the ancient record he claims to have translated. As Terryl L. Givens summarizes: “His self-described excavation of the plates, repeated secreting of them in bean barrels, under hearthstones, and in smocks, his displaying of them to eight corroborating witnesses, and his transcription of them into hieroglyphics and translation of them into English—this continual, extensive, and prolonged engagement with a tangible, visible, grounding artifact is not compatible with a theory that makes him an inspired writer reworking the stuff of his own dreams into a product worthy of the name scripture.” Nor, one could argue, is it compatible with the theory that he was an automatic writer in the sense in which that term is generally understood.

What is true of Dunn’s argument is that there are many similarities between the processes described by automatic writers and that described by Joseph Smith and his various stenographers of
Nephite history. Joseph receiving information from some source outside himself, seeing words in the seer stone (or in his mind’s eye), dictating a sort of stream-of-consciousness narrative, being able to pick up dictation/translation after interruptions and delays with no break in the narrative flow, producing a large body of material over a short period of time, and leaving the final text essentially unrevised—all of these have similarities to the producers of some automatically written texts.

But if one postulates that some automatic texts or some sacred literature really is the product of personages such as Moroni, Elijah, Moses, John the Baptist, and Peter, James, and John could appear to Joseph Smith, as he claimed and as Mormons believe, then it is easy to accept the possibility that revelations from Nephi, Mormon, Alma, and others could have come to him as well. In fact, it is interesting to speculate, as some early scholars of the Book of Mormon did, that these figures actually appeared to Joseph and told their stories in the same way that the authors of some automatic texts claim past prophets and historical figures appeared to or communicated through them.

If one accepts the possibility that Jehovah could reveal his law to Moses and that Jesus could reveal to John the strange and wonderful things contained in the book of Revelation, surely one must accept that the Lord could reveal the record of his New World peoples to Joseph Smith. How he would do so seems much less important than that he could do so.

A Look at Scientific Evidence

What evidence exists that such communications from the spirit world actually take place? While there is good reason to doubt the authenticity of some, if not most, texts claimed to be the result of automatic writing, not all examples of such writing can be explained as the result of naturalistic influences or causes. Obviously, this is a landscape on which believer and skeptic have contended for centuries—and will continue to contend, since at present we seem to lack the scientific tools and technology to establish incontrovertibly the existence of communication from another sphere, including what is sometimes referred to as “the spirit world.” Nevertheless, respected researchers are probing this possibility, some with support from the National Institutes of Health. One such researcher is Dr. Gary E. Schwartz, professor of psychology, medicine, neurology, psychiatry, and surgery at the University of Arizona and director of the university’s Human Energy Systems Laboratory.

For the past decade, Dr. Schwartz and his associates at the University of Arizona have been conduct-
ing scientific research on communication between the living and the dead. In the book *The Afterlife Experiments*, Schwartz reports on studies using established mediums (people who seem to have a gift for spirit communication) whose integrity they had come to trust. Schwartz and Dr. Linda G. Russek set up controlled, double-, and triple-blind laboratory experiments in which the mediums were asked to communicate with the spirit world on behalf of people unknown to them. In one experiment the mediums averaged an 83 percent accuracy rate in identifying information ostensibly communicated from the spirit world, as compared to 36 percent average for the control group. Dr. Schwartz concludes, “The statistical probability of this difference occurring by chance alone was less than one in ten million.”

Of their latest and most scientifically rigorous experiments, Dr. Schwartz reports, “We performed statistical analyses indicating that the results could have occurred by chance fewer than one in a 100 trillion times.”

In reviewing their experiments and evaluating them in light of what they consider their own high standards for scientific integrity, their own skeptical safeguards, and the challenges of nonbelieving critics, Dr. Schwartz concludes, “I went through all the experiments—each and every [psychic] reading, both within and beyond the formal data collection periods—and examined it all on the basis of eleven key points that form the core [of the experiments]. I can no longer ignore the data and dismiss the words. They are as real as the sun, the trees, and our television sets, which seem to pull pictures out of the air.” His conclusion: “In the experiments, information was consistently retrieved that can best be explained as coming from living souls. . . . The data appear to be as valid, convincing and living as the mediums, sitters, skeptics, and scientists themselves. That’s what the experimental data unmistakably show.”

Obviously, such findings are controversial and, as one would expect, not without challenges from the scientific community. Some scholars have questioned Dr. Schwartz’s methodology as well as his professional integrity. Among Schwartz’s most vigorous critics is James Randi, the founder of the James Randi Educational Foundation and a professional debunker of things paranormal. Randi and Schwartz have had a lively exchange on the subject that can be viewed on the Internet.

Another body of research that seems to have some bearing on the subject of “spirit communication” is that conducted by the Institute of HeartMath on intuition and epigenetics. Epigenetics is defined as the “science that studies how the development, functioning, and evolution of biological systems are influenced by forces operating outside the primary DNA sequence of the genome (i.e., intracellular, environmental, and energetic influences).” Based on research studies conducted under rigorous, conservative conditions on “how the body receives and processes prestimulus information about a future event,” HeartMath scientists conclude that “both the heart and brain appear to receive and respond to information about a future emotional stimulus prior to actually experiencing the stimulus.” Although differing in some aspects of their
methodology, these studies confirm earlier studies by Dean Radin, senior scientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences.29

These and additional studies by the Institute of HeartMath on intuition and the heart30 provide “strong evidence for the idea that intuitive processes involve the body accessing a field of information that is not limited by the constraints of space and time. More specifically, they provide a compelling basis for the proposition that the body accesses a field of potential energy—that exists as a domain apart from space-time reality—into which information about ‘future’ events is spectrally enfolded.”31

Whatever scientific evidence or lack thereof for communication beyond the veil, one has to consider the possibility that at least some of the cases of automatic writing might indeed be authentic communication across the liminal threshold that divides the mortal and immortal worlds. In view of this decidedly speculative conclusion, Joseph Smith’s claims as to the source of the Book of Mormon and the process by which he translated it must be accorded at least some validity given the elaborate explanations that must be marshaled as evidence that, alternatively, the book came out of his mind, experience, and imagination. In other words, if communication from the spirit world can produce even fragments of information, and if texts can be written that cannot be explained as the result of naturalistic causes, then it surely may be possible for someone to be the conduit of a book as complex and original as the Book of Mormon.

Countering the Connection

Having said that, I would like to illustrate ways in which I think the Book of Mormon does not fit the usual model of automatic writing.

Different Sources

To begin with, other writers of automatic texts (such as those discussed earlier in this paper) aver that their information comes from specific personalities who often have names, come from specific epochs, and have definite personalities. Unlike these mediums of extra-mortal communication, Joseph Smith never claimed that anyone was dictating to or communicating through him. While he saw specific words and phrases, he did not identify them as coming from a source beyond what was recorded on the gold plates.

Another way in which Joseph Smith’s claim differs from the producers of automatic texts is that he is the only one of whom I am aware who claimed to have an actual tangible text from which his dictation was derived. The gold plates revealed by Moroni and placed into Joseph’s hands constitute the source of the record he claims to have translated. At least 11 other witnesses attested to the existence of the plates.32

The Book of Mormon: Uniquely on Target

Joseph Smith, as far as I can tell, is unique in including in his text information that was not available anywhere in his or anyone else’s information environment during the time he produced his text. While Patience Worth spoke highly specialized English dialects and used archaic vocabulary that seem impossible for her medium, Pearl Curran, to have known, the fact remains that such dialects and vocabulary were available in the English-speaking environment of certain districts of England contemporaneous with Curran. The same could be said of Patience Worth’s use of topical information about the Holy Land in A Sorry Tale, her fictional narrative about Jesus. As one critic noted, “While the scenes are mainly in Palestine, it touches Rome occasionally, and it deals not only with Jews but with Romans, Greeks, and Arabians, revealing an intimate and accurate knowledge of the political, social and religious conditions of the times, the relations of each of these peoples to Rome, and their essential differences of character, custom and tradition.”33 Nevertheless, this information could have been found in sources extant at the time of the dictation.

Ancient travel. In contrast, the Book of Mormon contains information that, as far as can be determined, was not known to anyone in the world at the time it was published. For example, Eugene England pointed out that the route that Lehi and his people took across the Arabian Desert was counter to what all the travel guides of the 19th century described or advised. England summarizes, “For Joseph Smith to have so well succeeded in producing over twenty unique details in the description of an ancient travel route through one of the least-known areas of the world, all of which have been subsequently verified, requires extraordinary, unreasonable faith in
his natural genius or his ability to guess right in
direct opposition to the prevailing knowledge of his
time.” S. Kent Brown adds a number of items to
England’s list of details about Lehi’s route that were
not known anywhere in the 19th century.

Mesoamerica. Another example of material
in the Book of Mormon that was unknown and
unknowable in 1830 is the vast amount of detail
about Mesoamerica. As John L. Sorenson, one
of the leading authorities in this field, states, “At
point after point the scripture accurately reflects
the culture and history of ancient Mesoamerica.
. . . Where did such information come from if not
through Joseph in the manner he claimed? Literally
no person in Joseph Smith’s day knew or could have
known enough facts about exotic Central America
to depict the subtle and accurate picture of ancient
life that we find as background for the Book of Mor-
mon.” Sorenson cites such things as geographical
consistency, the pattern of cultural history (which
was “totally unknown in 1830,” for “not even the
best-informed scholars in the world at that time,
let alone Joseph Smith, had any notion of a pat-
tern behind ancient American history that would
come to light over a century later”), language (“How
remarkable that the record keepers of the Book of
Mormon allude again and again to their writing sys-
tems and, even more remarkable, that the Book of
Mormon statements fit so well with what we know
about the primary type of script in use in early
Mesoamerica”), Nephite political economy (“Noth-
ing Joseph Smith could have known in his day about
‘the Indians’ or the biblical Israelites would have
prepared him to dictate such a consistent picture of
Nephite and Lamanite government and society as he
actually did. Only in recent decades have scholars
learned enough to describe these ancient Meso-
american power mechanisms that prove to have
been so much like what the Book of Mormon por-
trays”), elements of material culture (“No one in the
nineteenth century could have known that cement, in fact, was extensively used in Mesoamerica beginning at about . . . the middle of the first century B.C.), and warfare (only during the “the last quarter century [has] a tide of new studies” validated the Book of Mormon’s portrayal of war).37

Ancient languages. Similarly significant is the Book of Mormon’s inclusion of words and rhetorical practices whose meanings and very existence have been discovered since 1830. A striking example is the word Hermounts (identified in Alma 2:37 as “that part of the wilderness which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts”). As Hugh Nibley pointed out, this word is almost identical with “Hermonthis,” a land named after the Egyptian god of wild things and wild places.38 And Gordon Thomasson argues persuasively that the word Mormon itself, which is first presented in the Book of Mormon as a place infested by wild beasts, has the same Arabic root, RMN, as Hermounts.39 Other Egyptian elements appear in the names Korihor, Pahoran, and Paanchi, the last of which is a 7th-century-BC name (i.e., contemporary with Lehi) not known in the West until the end of the 19th century.40 Nibley also suggested that the Book of Mormon’s use of Hebrew names, many of which are nonbiblical, “preserve[s] the authentic forms of the Hebrew names of the period as attested in newly discovered documents.”41

A further example of Book of Mormon language unknowable to Joseph Smith is the place-name Nahom (1 Nephi 16:34), where Nephi’s people buried Ishmael and mourned his passing. As various scholars have pointed out, this word seems related not only to the Arabic root NHM, which means “to sigh or moan” (suggesting grief) but also to a recently discovered ancient burial site, Nehm, which lies very close to the area where Ishmael was buried. As Givens argues, “Found in the very area
where Nephi’s record locates Nahom, these altars [votive altars from the Barʾan temple site in Yemen dating to the sixth and seventh centuries BC and inscribed with the tribal name NHM] may thus be said to constitute the first actual archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon.42

While some automatic texts claim to have been dictated by biblical figures, and therefore have in common with the Book of Mormon the literary, religious, and cultural background of the Hebrew scriptures, none has come close to matching the Book of Mormon’s reflection of the complex rhetorical style and stylistic patterns of Hebrew literature and its ritual patterns. The Book of Mormon is replete with stylistic elements characteristic of Hebrew speech and thought patterns, including adverbials, cognate accusatives, compound prepositions, pronoun repetition, simile curses, climactic forms, and various kinds of biblical parallelisms, among them complex and intricate examples of chiasmus.43 If, as some critics contend, Joseph Smith somehow absorbed all of this or intuited it from his familiarity with the Hebrew scriptures, he accomplished something that no other author in the history of the world has. The sheer complexity of the Book of Mormon narrative is far beyond that of any automatic text of which I am aware.

Concluding Thoughts

One might cite many more examples of things in the Book of Mormon that were unavailable in Joseph Smith’s information environment or completely foreign to his experience. The chances that Joseph Smith could have guessed at even one of these, let alone hundreds, are astronomical. No naturalist critic of whom I am aware has come close to explaining their presence in the Book of Mormon. I believe this constitutes a significant refutation of Dunn’s statement “There does not appear to be anything of a historical, theological, philosophical, or literary quality in the scriptural writings of Joseph Smith that has not been matched by those well outside the Mormon tradition.”45

As someone who trusts both spiritual and empirical processes in the search for truth, I have tried honestly and fairly to evaluate the data and arguments presented by both apologist and naturalist critics of the Book of Mormon. Naturalist critics, to my mind, raise important issues about the origin and nature of the text. I honor their efforts when they derive from a sincere attempt to come to terms with the book using the best tools for intellectual inquiry and rational exploration. Some of the challenges they present are legitimate and deserve serious consideration.
On the other hand, apologist critics also make invaluable contributions to the dialogue, and their work, when it is based on rigorous scholarship and on responsible spiritual witness, should also be taken seriously. For the most part, I have found such scholars to be people of integrity who are using their best intellectual and spiritual abilities to understand and explain the Book of Mormon. When they defend the book on a purely spiritual basis, they must understand that they enter a realm where few naturalist critics are willing to follow. However, when they combine their empirical inquiry with rigorous spiritual standards (including the integrity to honestly test their spiritual convictions against the best considered knowledge), they should be given respect for their conclusions.

I believe that the evidence suggested by some automatic writing, as well as the intuition studies of Casper S. Yost observed about Pearl Curran, “The subconscious has a larger store of information than the conscious part of the mind, but it has no objective knowledge not acquired by individual experience, it has no objective impressions that are not made through the senses. It knows nothing externally, that is to say, that it has not learned by seeing, hearing, touch, tasting or smelling. . . . No objective knowledge is in any part of Mrs. Curran’s mind that has not been acquired through her own sensory experience.”

Perhaps Yost’s observation should be revised to read that the mind contains no objective terrestrial knowledge that has not been received through the senses. This leaves open the possibility that memory and knowledge may have some other locus of origin, such as premortal experiences or revealed dreams and visions. The point is that if one contends, as do some naturalist critics, that the rich tapestry of narrative we know as the Book of Mormon came from the mind and imagination of Joseph Smith, one has to account for the process by which it did so. No one in my opinion has offered a more satisfactory or more convincing explanation than the one Joseph Smith himself gave.

It is important to remember that the material in the Book of Mormon had its origin in some locus. In order for it to have come from Joseph Smith’s conscious or subconscious mind, it had to have gotten there somehow. As Casper S. Yost observed, “The subconscious has a larger store of information than the conscious part of the mind, but it has no objective knowledge not acquired by individual experience, it has no objective impressions that are not made through the senses. It knows nothing externally, that is to say, that it has not learned by seeing, hearing, touch, tasting or smelling. . . . No objective knowledge is in any part of Mrs. Curran’s mind that has not been acquired through her own sensory experience.”

Some naturalist critics speculate that all of the information contained in the Book of Mormon came from Joseph Smith’s 19th-century environs. In citing the example of an automatic writer who apparently “picked up and stored material that was in her field of vision as she worked [a] crossword puzzle,” Scott Dunn says, “It should not be surprising, therefore, to find Smith’s scriptural productions repeating things he may have heard or overheard in conversation, camp meetings, or other settings without any concerted study of the issues.” Dunn would be hard-pressed to show that anyone could
have overheard the material presented earlier in this paper at camp meetings or anywhere else in the Palmyra area during the time the Book of Mormon was translated. The remarkable thing about the Book of Mormon is that there is not a single fact, character, or allusion that can be tied exclusively to 19th-century America. Most parallels that environmentalist critics find between the book and Joseph Smith’s cultural environment are of such a general and superficial nature that they could be found at many times and in many cultures. As Richard L. Bushman contends, the milieu of the Book of Mormon has much more in common with ancient Hebrew culture than 19th-century America. He summarizes his analysis by saying that the Book of Mormon is “strangely distant from the time and place of its publication.” Along the same line, Givens concludes, “In sum, there is simply little basis for arguing that the worldview of Joseph’s era had any influence on the make-up of the Book of Mormon itself.” As a specialist in the literary history of the period in which the Book of Mormon emerged, I can state categorically that it is unlike any book written in the entire scope of American literature.

In conclusion, while I do not find the Book of Mormon a credible candidate as an automatic text, I believe it is more closely related to automatic writing than, say, normative narrative fiction, the former (in some instances) coming from someplace outside the author’s mind and imagination and the latter coming entirely from within him. That is, on the basis of what I rationally accept as evidence, there seem to be supernatural forces at work in some written communications, automatic or otherwise. Just as I accept the fact that Pearl Curran could not be the author of the Patience Worth manuscripts and that some of the communications recorded by Drs. Schwartz and Russek could not be the products of the mediums they engaged in their experiments, so I don’t believe that Joseph Smith was or could have been the author of the Book of Mormon.
The Book of Mormon is a wondrous story. Between its miraculous beginning and tragic ending, numerous individuals step onto a dramatic stage and act in accordance with their moral agency in pursuit of certain goals. The narrative is filled with such diverse actions as migrations, conversions, sermons, prophesying, wars, captivity and liberation, death and succession, social renewal and disintegration, and apostasy and genocide. The fabric of these events, woven together into an epic narrative, constitutes the official record of an ancient civilization.

What are we to make of the narrative quality of this sacred record? Is the historical frame integral to meaning or primarily of heuristic value? Would the book’s essential meaning change if its messages were communicated through a perspective other than narrative? Is the story’s structure as central to overall meaning as are its contents? Did the principal authors consciously craft the narrative into an integrated whole, or was their literary task simply to edit, however drastically, preexisting primary sources?
Grounds for Investigation

This study is an effort to address such questions regarding the Book of Mormon. Serious study of the book’s narrative is suggested partly by some of its unusual characteristics, including the following:

Point of view. The Book of Mormon consists of major portions of first- and third-person narrative. All of Nephi’s “small plates” and the entire books that Mormon and Moroni wrote concerning their own times consist of first-person narrative. These sections comprise roughly one-third of the Book of Mormon text and one-half of the time period of Nephite history. The rest of the story is narrated mostly in the third person, occasionally reverting to a first-person account (e.g., Mosiah 9–10; Alma 36–42). It is significant to note, by contrast, that the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible are primarily in the omniscient third person. The book of Nehemiah is the only extended first-person historical narrative in the Old Testament. Furthermore, first-person narrative appears only briefly in the “Prophets” section (Isaiah–Malachi but excluding Daniel), largely to document a prophet’s divine calling or to otherwise contextualize his prophecies. Though seldom used in the Bible, first-person narrative plays a major role and serves a central value in the Book of Mormon. The relationship between first- and third-person narrative may reveal something fundamental about this ancient record.

Editorial commentary. The whole Book of Mormon (both the first- and third-person sections) is replete with conscious editorial intrusions by the narrators. By contrast, in the Hebrew Bible the narrators’ influence is seen mostly in the crafting of the story line—what is included and excluded and how it is expressed and ordered within the narrative—and seldom in direct editorial commentary. The editorial commentary in the Book of Mormon often occurs at critical junctures in the narrative, such as crises of leadership, social disintegration, major spiritual transitions, and moral collapse (see 1 Nephi 6, 9; Alma 24:19; 28:13–14; 46:8–9; Helaman 2:13–14;12; Mormon 6:16–7:10; 8:33–41; Moroni 10:30–34). Significantly, one of the most extended editorial comments is so crucial to the narrative that it is distinguished with its own title, “Words of Mormon.” This aside is devoted to explaining one of Mormon’s most unusual editorial decisions. After abridging Nephi’s “large plates” (covering the time of Lehi to the reign of King Benjamin), Mormon found a smaller record, written by Nephi and subsequent prophets, that cov-

Unlike the Bible, the Book of Mormon is replete with editorial commentary such as the prophet Mormon’s careful explanation of his decision to incorporate the small plates of Nephi into his abridgment of the large plates, thereby joining first- and third-person accounts. Image courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

26a Mosiah 9:2 (1–4);
30a 1 Ne 6: 3 (3–6);
Jacob 4: 4 (1–2);
Jarom 1: 14.

[Words of Mormon]

1 a 1 Ne 5: 12 (9–12);
Morm. 1:4 (1–4);
2: 17 (17–18); 8:5
(1, 4–5, 18).
2b Mormon 6: 5 (5–6).
3b 1 Ne 12: 19.

b 3 Ne 5: 17 (14–18);
Morm. 1:1.
1 Ne 9: 2.
4a Alma 13:31; 3 Ne 5: 8
(9–13); 26:6 (6–12).

[*About A.D. 385*]
ered the same time period and included many of the same events. He decided to add the smaller record in its entirety to the larger narrative, its abridged counterpart, so that the original version of his history would have first- and third-person accounts of the same period (see Words of Mormon 1:3–6).

Furthermore, not only did the Book of Mormon narrators feel free to add explicit editorial commentary, but they also played major roles in the historical story lines. They were named or otherwise identified, filled critical roles, and on occasion consciously incorporated the history of their record keeping into the larger narrative they were carefully crafting. It is as though keeping the narrative record of their people was equivalent to preserving the essence of their unique identity. By contrast, the biblical narrators are not characters in the story. With the exception of Ezra and Nehemiah, we know little about who they were and less about the roles they might have played in the larger sacred history of the Jews.

**Narrative content.** Much of the Book of Mormon clearly supports its single-minded spiritual purposes. This content includes doctrinal discourses, ecclesiastical missions, conversion experiences, revelations and prophecies, and, of course, the crowning account of the risen Christ's ministry. At the same time, however, the spiritual significance of the book's other content—military campaigns, political intrigues, and social crises (see Alma 43–3 Nephi 10)—seems incongruous with, or extraneous to, the book's explicit spiritual purposes. This seeming incongruity intensifies when it becomes clear that Mormon subordinated or eliminated altogether material such as the work of the Church of Christ and the gospel's influence on its adherents in favor of giving full narrative attention to seemingly secular content (e.g., Alma 45:22–23; 46:6, 38; 50:23–25; 62:44–51). Equally curious is Mormon's drastic truncation of the account of the nearly two centuries of utopian-like righteousness following Christ's ministry to the Nephites (see 4 Nephi 1:1–20). Furthermore, Mormon and Moroni end their sacred history with an account of the gruesome annihilation of their people, even though these two prophets were acquainted with and could have included the stories of righteous Nephites who had initially escaped the catastrophe and continued to live the gospel as best they could, given their abject circumstances (see Mormon 8:2–3; Moroni 1:1–2). However, Mormon and Moroni chose not to include details of such courage and sacrifice. Contemporary historians could hardly conceive of a patently religious history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reflecting documentary priorities like these. What was Mormon's motivation for shifting his editorial focus?

If such seemingly secular content is considered in isolation—that is, with individual passages interpreted as though they were disconnected from one another and from the rest of the story—it is of course still possible for modern readers to draw important moral or ethical lessons from those passages. However, if we assume that Mormon was crafting an integrated narrative rather than assembling a patchwork of random events, then the task of interpretation in light of authorial intent becomes all the more difficult. It requires identifying a set of principles that enables us to understand simultaneously these "secular" and other portions of the narrative from a unified perspective. While there is no certainty that Mormon intended to create an integrated narrative (attempting to do so would have been an ambitious and significant undertaking), the supreme concern with which Book of Mormon authors approached their literary mission and the eternal value of their resulting narrative suggest the likelihood of an integrated approach.

**Establishing an Analytical Framework**

Understanding the Book of Mormon from an integrated and unified perspective is facilitated by applying the following analytical principles:
Comprehensive. This principle assumes that the best analytical framework will account for all data relevant to the question under investigation. Any approach that fails in this regard must be considered of limited value or inherently flawed.

Systematic. Responsible analysis does not simply account for the existence of data. The better the analytical framework, the more it will reveal the systematic connections among the data under investigation. The principles that reveal these interrelationships are often those that define the meaning of the phenomena under investigation.

Simple. This principle privileges an analytical perspective that reveals the systematic relations among the greatest amount of relevant data using the fewest number of independent premises. Premises are considered independent if they are not derived from or dependent upon one another.

Concrete. For analysis to be truly scholarly, it must also be falsifiable. This principle requires that the study’s premises be capable of empirical or logical contradiction. For scholarly purposes, if a theoretical premise is incapable of being proved false, then either it is logically flawed (e.g., based on circular or tautological reasoning) or it belongs to a nonscientific realm of discourse (e.g., ethics or metaphysics) whose premises (e.g., “God is dead” or “Love is the most distinctively human of emotions”) are simply asserted and whose logical implications are examined but are not ordinarily subject to empirical verification.

Any research methodology entails certain premises that guide inquiry. Key to the present study are the following three analytical premises, which find support in the course of this study:

1. Even though the principal authors of the Book of Mormon struggled mightily with their respective literary missions, Nephi and Mormon were conscious of an overall purpose for their writing, and they crafted a text consistent with and integral to that purpose. Evidence of this literary consciousness and the resulting craftsmanship comes from the nature of the completed text and from their numerous editorial asides.

2. The meaning of the text is intricately connected with its structure. That is, the spiritual significance of the Book of Mormon is in large measure a function of its status as a historical narrative.

3. The first- and third-person portions of the narrative, particularly Nephi’s small plates and Mormon’s abridgment, exist in a dynamic and intricate interrelationship. Their meaning derives from and depends upon each other.

These premises owe much to, but are not directly derived from, the biblical scholarship of Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, David Noel Freedman, and their colleagues. In an effort to relate the literary forms of the Hebrew Bible to its meaning, these scholars have identified various principles used to craft its diverse contents. Heavily influenced by literary criticism, their work reveals an impressive array of literary conventions employed in that process. Sternberg has gone so far as to say that this body of insight constitutes a “poetics” of biblical narrative.

I am also indebted to an analytical tradition called “structuralism.” Influenced by the field of linguistics, structuralism is a subspecialty of cultural anthropology that attempts to derive a kind of archetypal logic from the intensive study of sacred texts. Examining the systematic organization of data within texts—collectively called their “structures”—provides insight into the role and significance of those texts within a particular culture. Just as architectural historians, archaeologists, and curators look for patterns of order in various kinds of material culture, structural anthropologists look for literary patterns in texts and oral narratives. When the latter are woven together by an expert craftsman, their “structures” yield remarkable insights into the meaning of a text and the soul of a people.

This study will illustrate one small but significant pattern of narrative structuring in the Book of Mormon. The steps of this analysis will (1) identify...
a pattern of historical structure that is distinctive to and pervades Mormon’s abridgment, (2) relate this structure to a complementary pattern in Nephi’s small plates, (3) test the validity of this patterning of the historical narrative against Mormon’s explicit editorial asides, and then (4) suggest the interpretive significance of these correlated patterns for the Book of Mormon as a whole.

**Patterning in Mormon’s Abridgment**

This study of Book of Mormon narrative structure encompasses the book’s three distinctive characteristics mentioned earlier: point of view, editorial commentary, and narrative content. I start with the contents that seem somewhat out of place in a religious record: military campaigns, political intrigues, and social crises. Mormon begins his detailed account of the Nephite wars with an explicit editorial shift (see Alma 43:2–3). Although he had known of and alluded to extensive armed conflict in his earlier abridgment of the Nephite records (e.g., Mosiah 10; 20; Alma 2; 15), to this point in his narrative he had chosen not to detail even one battle. In further contrast, Mormon had just completed a detailed account of the remarkable spiritual conversions and relatively successful ministries of Alma the Elder, Alma the Younger, and the sons of Mosiah among both the Nephites and Lamanites (see Mosiah 17–Alma 35). He had also included the verbatim account of the final spiritual counsel of Alma the Younger to his sons Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton (see Alma 36–42).

After focusing on patently spiritual matters for over 100 pages of text, Mormon makes an abrupt shift in his narrative. He acknowledges that Alma and his sons continued their missions but then explicitly states, “Now we shall say no more concerning their preaching” (Alma 43:2). This shift in focus was not required by a lack of ecclesiastical data; throughout the war narrative, Mormon intermittently refers to their ongoing ministries (e.g., Alma 45:22–23; 46:6, 38; 50:23–25; 62:44–51). Yet instead of focusing on ecclesiology, theology, conversions, and spiritual epiphanies, Mormon chooses at this point to focus his account of the next century of Nephite history almost exclusively on military conflicts between Lamanites and Nephites, fractious internal Nephite politics, social disintegration, and natural catastrophes (Alma 43–3 Nephi 9). The preaching of Samuel the Lamanite is a notable exception (Helaman 13–15).

Principal themes during this period include the Lamanite wars as fomented by Nephite dissenter s and apostates (Alma 43–63), the political intrigues and social disintegration that rendered Nephite society increasingly vulnerable to Lamanite incursions and the terror- ism of the Gadianton band (Helaman 1–3 Nephi 4), the inability of the Church of Christ to stem the general tide of wickedness among the Nephites (3 Nephi 6–7), and the natural disasters sent by God to destroy the wicked (3 Nephi 8–9). As a result of these developments, Nephite society was in total disarray. Many of its cities and lands had been destroyed, its citizens slaughtered or displaced, and its institutions and social structure ruined. Virtually nothing remained of the civilization that had prospered in the promised land for nearly 600 years. Mormon devotes nearly one-fifth of his entire history of the Nephites to this century of progressive decline and destruction.

Within this setting of virtual catastrophe, the resurrected Christ appeared to a crowd of survivors gathered at the temple in the land Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:1). Christ’s ministry to the Nephites consisted of three full days and a number of subsequent visits (3 Nephi 26:13). During this brief ministry, Christ testified of his divinity (3 Nephi 9:15–11:17), delivered his gospel (3 Nephi 12–16; 27:13–33), organized and named his church (3 Nephi 11:18–12:1; 18:1–20:9; 27:1–12), ministered
to the spiritual needs of his followers (3 Nephi 17; 20:1–9), and prophesied concerning his kingdom in the latter days (3 Nephi 20–22; 24–25). Mormon’s account of these events occupies 36 pages in the present edition, constituting by far the most detailed portion of the entire Book of Mormon narrative.

Mormon’s abridgment next focuses on the resulting two centuries of righteousness. In contrast to the detailed account of Christ’s ministry, which averages roughly 10 pages of text per day in the present edition, that of the spiritual utopia averages nearly 10 years per verse of text (4 Nephi 1:1–20). This extended period is one of great spiritual achievement: converting the rest of the people (4 Nephi 1:1–2); eliminating poverty, crime, sin, and oppression (vv. 2–3, 16–17); performing miracles (vv. 5, 13); rebuilding destroyed cities (vv. 7–10); establishing harmony and peace throughout the society (vv. 2, 13, 15); and realizing the blessings of the gospel in the lives of Christ’s followers (vv. 11–12, 18). Yet Mormon does not include in his narrative one detail of any of these extraordinary spiritual accomplishments.

His purpose for omitting those details from the narrative must have been greater than any value gained by including them. Elsewhere in his abridgment, Mormon specifically references a divine injunction in which the Lord has him omit supremely sacred contents (e.g., 3 Nephi 26:9–11). Yet he is silent as to his reasons for drastically truncating the spiritual high point of his narrative.

Mormon’s narrative ends with the total annihilation of his people (see 4 Nephi 1:21–Mormon 8). While his accounts of the four generations of righteousness and of the Nephites’ destruction each encompasses about 175 years, his account of the destruction receives much greater emphasis in the narrative than the generations of righteousness do—about 17 pages compared with less than 2 pages of text in the present edition. Mormon suggests why he did not provide more details of this genocide (see Mormon 4:11–12; 5:8–9). Although nearly all the narrative of the final destruction focuses on his futile efforts to forestall the inevitable, yet he is not fatalistic. Except for one period in which he refuses to lead the Nephite armies, serving instead as an “idle witness” to their wickedness, he tirelessly works with his people to avert catastrophe (see Mormon 3:9–16).

In short, the second half of Mormon’s abridgment addresses four major historical themes: Nephite turmoil preceding Christ’s ministry, Christ’s ministry to the survivors of simultaneous natural disasters, the resulting spiritual utopia in the promised land, and the final annihilation of the Nephites. Considerable attention is given to the turmoil and to Christ’s ministry, virtually no attention to the nearly two centuries of spiritual utopia, and moderate attention to the Nephites’ demise. Accounting for these major themes in Mormon’s abridgment, not in isolation from one another but in terms of their systematic interrelationship and the context of Mormon’s larger narrative, has never been attempted. The rest of this study seeks to do so with reference to both critical portions of the historical narrative and central editorial comments of its principal author.

Correspondence in Nephi’s Small Plates

A narrative pattern that corresponds quite closely with Mormon’s abridgment of these four major themes is found in Nephi’s account of his own vision of the tree of life and in his associated prophecies in 1 Nephi 11–14. Before considering the details of Nephi’s vision in relation to Mormon’s abridgment, we must consider Nephi’s vision in relation to his father’s dream. These two profoundly spiritual experiences are linked in two critical dimensions. Chronologically, the account of Nephi’s vision almost immediately follows that of Lehi’s dream. In fact, the dream is the direct motivation for the vision, since Nephi received the vision after hearing and desiring to understand his father’s dream (see 1 Nephi 11:1). The dream and vision are also metaphorically connected in that both are representations of the plan of salvation. In quite different but complementary ways, they express Nephite desires for and understandings of God’s ultimate blessings for his children.

On the one hand, the dream is an allegorical representation of salvation in which elements, personalities, and events stand for spiritual realities. For example, the tree of life and fountain of living waters represent the love of God; the fruit of the tree stands for eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God”; the iron rod represents the word of God; the great and spacious building represents the pride
of world; and the river of water represents filthiness and the “awful gulf” that separates the wicked and righteous (see 1 Nephi 11:25, 35–36; 15:21–36). Although the only identified individuals in the dream are members of Lehi’s family, the “numberless concourses of people” (1 Nephi 8:21) represent all of humanity. Interpreting the dream as an allegory, we conclude that salvation is available to all who hold fast to the word of God, who resist the influence of the wicked world, who partake of the atonement of Christ, and who endure in faith until the end.

By contrast, Nephi’s vision is not a figurative but a literal representation of the plan of salvation. It depicts God’s redemptive work as it unfolds in real-world spatial, temporal, and human contexts. Through actual persons, places, and events, God’s plan of salvation becomes manifest and its purposes partially realized in mortality.

Nephi’s historical vision of the plan of salvation is, in essence, an extended prophecy consisting of a spiritual drama in four acts. Each act focuses on a dominant theme: the earthly ministry of Christ in the Holy Land (1 Nephi 11), the Nephites and Lamanites in the promised land (1 Nephi 12), the Gentiles and the House of Israel in the Old and New Worlds (1 Nephi 13), and the triumph of good over evil at the end of time (1 Nephi 14).

Let us take up the second act of this drama of redemption—the history of the Nephites and Lamanites in the promised land—because of all the acts in this drama, this envisioned history is most relevant to the historical contours we have identified in Mormon’s abridgment. This portion of Nephi’s vision contains four distinct but related prophecies: the “wars and contentions” of the Nephites prior to Christ’s coming (1 Nephi 12:1–5), the ministry of Christ in the promised land (12:6–10), the resulting four generations of righteousness...
(12:11–12), and the final annihilation of the Nephites by the Lamanites (12:13–19). When this prophetic pattern of events is compared to Mormon's historical pattern, several remarkable similarities appear. The two patterns are virtually identical in terms of contents, sequence, and relative weighting of the depicted events. In both, the order of events is the same: “wars and destructions” followed by Christ's ministry, spiritual utopia, and Nephite annihilation. The relative attention to detail is also similar. Considerable attention is given to the Nephite wars and to Christ's ministry, very little focus rests on the four generations of righteousness, and a relatively greater emphasis is given to the final destruction of the Nephites. If viewed in isolation, such textual similarities could be considered coincidental. However, when viewed systematically within the entire historical narrative, the correspondence between the prophetic and historical accounts of these events seems to be integral to the authors' purpose and central to the book's overall meaning. It seems as though Mormon's abridgment is documenting the fulfillment of key prophecies from Nephi's vision. If so, Mormon structured his historical account to imitate the prophetic account in order to demonstrate how literally and completely those prophecies of Nephi had been fulfilled.

The possibility that this correspondence is intentional is heightened when viewed from the perspective of repetition in the Hebrew Bible, an established literary convention. Although Nephi eschewed the general “manner of prophesying among the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:1), he did not reject the tradition altogether. Witness his liberal citations from the prophecies of Isaiah, Zenos, Zenock, and other named and unnamed Hebrew prophets in 1 Nephi 19–21 and 2 Nephi 6–8; 12–24 (for examples of subsequent Nephite prophets citing additional Hebrew prophets, see Jacob 5; Mosiah 14; Alma 33–34; Helaman 8; 3 Nephi 10; 22; 24–25). Biblical narrators used repetition to reinforce central messages of documented events, interpret historical events for different audiences, and mark the literal fulfillment of prophecy. If the biblical practice can be considered a valid antecedent, the degree of repetition between Nephi's prophetic and Mormon's historical accounts of these events may provide rhetorical evidence of their significance for this sacred history. Mormon may have structured his historical account to mirror Nephi's prophetic account in order to illustrate how completely and literally this portion of the Nephite plan of salvation was fulfilled. Before testing the validity of this insight against explicit editorial comments of the authors, I must illustrate one more way that prophecy and history seem to connect Nephi's small plates and Mormon's abridgment.

In addition to using Nephi's prophecies as a model to structure his historical abridgment, Mormon seems also to have used Nephi's prophecies to define the corpus of Nephite prophecy for his abridgment. Of the hundreds of individual prophecies included in the Book of Mormon, nearly all find their initial expression in Nephi's record. Nephi's prophecies are further reiterated, refined, enlarged, and detailed in Mormon's and Moroni's subsequent narratives. Not surprisingly, the prophecies anticipating Christ's ministry, which find greatest attention in Nephi's record, are those that are most often repeated in Mormon's abridgment. By contrast, Nephi's prophecy of the four generations of righteousness is repeated only twice (briefly) in Nephi's account and only twice (indirectly) in Mormon's entire abridgment (compare 1 Nephi 12:11–12; 2 Nephi 26:9 and Alma 45:12; 3 Nephi 27:31–32).
Mormon’s abridgment includes a few prophecies that do not initially appear in the small plates. These prophecies play an important but very narrow role in the course of the historical narrative. They are generally uttered and fulfilled within particular historical contexts; hence they never reach the grand scale of the many prophecies that unify Nephi’s and Mormon’s accounts more generally. Because these prophecies are so infrequent in their appearance and so relatively modest in their significance within Mormon’s narrative, they do not undermine the general rule that Nephi’s record defines a corpus of prophecy that Mormon uses to abridge the Nephite records.

Mormon’s Preface

We now test the thesis that Mormon consciously used Nephi’s small plates as a framework to abridge the large plates, measuring it against Mormon’s explicit editorial comments. In the absence of documentation that lies outside a text (e.g., correspondence, notes, initial drafts, and descriptions of the writing process by others), editorial commentary within the text can help clarify the author’s intentions and objectives in writing. Regarding the creation of the Book of Mormon, only the completed text (as represented by the printed editions and extant portions of the initial manuscripts) has survived. Hence we must weigh its internal evidence—narrative and editorial—carefully and rigorously when drawing interpretive conclusions.

The extended editorial comment called Words of Mormon is the most straightforward statement of the principal author’s literary intent. Even though this two-page aside appears one-third of the way through the published text, it serves the whole as a kind of preface, revealing as clearly as any other editorial comment what Mormon understood to be the interpretive focus of his abridgment. Although seemingly misplaced as a preface, Words of Mormon is strategically positioned to explain one of Mormon’s most innovative literary initiatives: his inclusion of Nephi’s small plates verbatim into the larger narrative after he had abridged an account from the large plates covering the same time period.

According to this editorial statement, after Mormon finished abridging Nephi’s large plates from the time of Lehi to King Benjamin, something caused him to search further among the records “which had been delivered into my hands” (Words of Mormon 1:3). Mormon was likely prompted to do so by a reference in the large plates to a second record of Nephi of which Mormon had been previously unaware. Nephi’s first record, which inaugurates the large plates, was begun in response to a divine command that he received shortly after Lehi’s family arrived in the land of promise (see 1 Nephi 19:1–6). His second record, known today as Nephi’s small plates, was begun between 20 and 30 years later (see 2 Nephi 5:29–34). After Nephi’s death, the record on the large plates continued to be kept by Nephi’s kingly successors, while his prophetic successors continued to keep their record on the small plates. During King Benjamin’s righteous reign some four centuries later, the prophet Amaleki transferred the small plates to Benjamin, making him the first steward of both sets of plates since the prophet Nephi (see Omni 1:25; Words of Mormon 1:10–11). The reference to this second record of Nephi probably appeared in the expanded account of the succession of kings—either that of Mosiah to his son Benjamin or of Benjamin to his son Mosiah—since inventorying and reviewing the significance of the sacred records and artifacts seem to be a customary part of the formal succession of Nephite leaders (see Mosiah 1:1–16; 28:11; Alma 37; 63:1–3; Helaman 3:13–15; 3 Nephi 1:2–3; 4 Nephi 1:48).

By searching among the plates in his possession, Mormon found the missing record. What attracted his attention at this time was the discovery of certain contents that convinced him to include the entire account verbatim in his abridgment, even though he had just completed the abridgment of a more extensive account of exactly the same time period from Nephi’s large plates. Supporting his decision to include the entirety of the small plates, Mormon comments that the contents of Nephi’s second record “are choice unto me; and I know they will be choice unto my brethren” (Words of Mormon 1:6).

To help the reader understand the significance of this unusual decision to combine comparable historical accounts, Mormon identifies the contents of the newly found record that he found so compelling:

And the things which are upon these plates pleasing me, because of the prophecies of the coming of Christ; and my fathers knowing that many of them have been fulfilled; yea, and I also know that as many things as have been
prophecied concerning us down to this day [late fourth century AD] have been fulfilled, and as many as go beyond this day must surely come to pass. (Words of Mormon 1:4)

Having identified the contents of the small plates that he found worthy to preserve verbatim, Mormon next declares his interpretive purpose for doing so: “Wherefore, I chose these things [i.e., the “prophesyings and revelations” of Nephi’s second record; see Words of Mormon 1:6], to finish my record upon them, which remainder of my record I shall take from the [large] plates of Nephi” (Words of Mormon 1:5).

While the precise meaning of this declaration of editorial intent may be debated, the following interpretation is as plausible as any. Mormon found the sacred contents of Nephi’s second record so compelling that he used them as a framework to abridge and thereby interpret the remainder of the large plates. In particular, Nephi’s prophecies became so crucial to his literary purpose that he consciously structured a major portion of his narrative in order to document their literal and complete fulfillment.

This reading is internally consistent with Mormon’s editorial comment itself, with the broad textual evidence of his crafting of the abridgment, and with the preliminary interpretive insights about the structural relations between Nephi’s small plates and Mormon’s abridgment of the large plates. In the absence of absolute certainty concerning the meaning of declarations like Mormon’s, we must rely on degrees of probability. The proposed interpretation has a high degree of probable accuracy, given its systematic relevance to disparate data throughout the Book of Mormon text. Until a more probable interpretation is presented, the one advanced here merits serious consideration. What is beyond question is, first, that Mormon discovered something of great value in Nephi’s small plates that he had not gained from abridging the large plates covering the same time period, and second, that he subsequently utilized these insights in abridging the rest of the large plates.

This study suggests one way that Nephi and Mormon, the two principal authors of the Book of Mormon, may have explicitly structured the contents of their epic history. Its thesis is that Mormon abridged the large plates of Nephi consistent with a pattern that he discovered in Nephi’s small plates.

As a result, the two records share a purpose that transcends the value of their individual contents if considered in isolation. Evidence for this thesis comes from Mormon’s explicit editorial comments and from systematic textual parallels between the two accounts. From this perspective, Mormon included all of Nephi’s small plates in his abridgment in order to draw attention to the close correspondence between prophecy and scriptural history.

Meaning Reflected in Narrative Structure

The correspondence between the small and large plates suggests that Mormon adopted the prophecies in the small plates not only to structure the bulk of his historical abridgment but also to emphasize some of its most sacred contents. If Mormon indeed “chose these things” of Nephi’s record “to finish my record upon them” (Words of Mormon 1:5), what are we to make of the relationship between prophecy and history in the Book of Mormon? Within the limits of this study, I offer a few preliminary observations on the nature of the Book of Mormon as a historical record.

Because the narrative seems to be influenced to a great extent by Nephi’s vision of the plan of salvation, the Book of Mormon is neither a general history of the Nephites nor a record of primarily descriptive value. Although the narrative is replete with objective contents, its purpose is not empirical but rather spiritual documentation. The authors include historical, social, geographical, and other details in order to define the plan of salvation in real-world terms and to demonstrate its partial fulfillment among a portion of God’s children. Placing historical events within such a divine perspective, Mormon’s historical narrative achieves a greater degree of spiritual significance. The prophetic utterances and their historical fulfillment are complementary parts of the same process of showing to God’s children (1) the way that they may return to him through the gospel of Jesus Christ and (2) the consequences for their souls if they do not. For Mormon, this purpose seems to be far more compelling than anything else his record might have accomplished. In fact, circumstances, personalities, and events that do not help explicate this revealed plan and other exalted purposes are treated as extraneous, trivial, or otherwise unworthy to be preserved.
in this official record. Thus Mormon includes in his abridgment less than one one-hundredth of the historical information available to him (see Words of Mormon 1:5; Alma 13:31; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6).

Just as the concept of history in the Book of Mormon is singular, so is the set of personal qualifications needed for the authors to produce such a work. In particular, priesthood keys and highly refined spiritual gifts—including prophecy, revelation, and “seeing”—were required to grasp the mind and will of God, as regards the overall focus and particular contents of the narrative. In addition, its principal authors needed well-developed analytical and literary skills to reveal such exalted concepts within and through the stuff and substance of everyday life and language. For Nephi and Mormon, the past, in this exalted sense, was no more knowable than the future without such spiritual and professional capacities (e.g., Mosiah 8:16–17 identifies one of the qualities of a seer as being able “to know of things which are past,” presumably in a way that was unattainable to record keepers who did not possess this spiritual gift).

The principal authors of the Book of Mormon developed and refined their literary and spiritual capacities through similar life experiences. Both Nephi and Mormon received formal training early in life in order to realize their extraordinary potential (see 1 Nephi 1:2; Mormon 1:2–6). Both writers overcame considerable opposition and affliction in their personal lives, some of which came as a direct result of their literary endeavors (e.g., 2 Nephi 33:3; Mormon 5:8–24). These challenges deepened their spiritual sensitivities and personal resolve to devote their full effort to record only “the things of God” (see 1 Nephi 6:3–4).

They also refined their literary skills through extensive prior writing. Nephi, for example, had been compiling the first account of his ministry for some 30 years before the Lord commanded him to begin a second record (see 1 Nephi 19:1; 2 Nephi 5:30–33). Likewise, Mormon had likely compiled the “full account” of his own ministry before undertaking his abridgment of the large plates, and then he refocused his abridgment after discovering Nephi’s small plates (see Mormon 2:18; Words of Mormon 1:3–5).

From this perspective, the meaning of the Book of Mormon is reflected in the structure of the narrative as much as in its contents. While particular contents of the narrative may be considered meaningful in isolation from one another or in a context whose focus lies outside the text itself, the approach advocated in this study, while not inimical to such a perspective, relies on the full text of the Book of Mormon for a fuller understanding of its meaning. Such insights are gained by identifying detailed, systematic, and complex patterns and relationships among various parts of the text. These patterns then become the evidence of the prevailing concerns that the authors had in producing the work in the first place. Explicit editorial comments of the authors help to connect these portions of the text in similarly meaningful ways.

Sometimes such insights come from portions of the narrative that seem unusual or out of place. For example, the presence of an extended war narrative (Alma 43–62) or of a severely truncated account of a spiritual utopia (4 Nephi 1:1–20) may seem odd in a work that is considered to be of supremely spiritual value. Likewise, the presence of two accounts dealing with a similar time frame (e.g., the ministries of Lehi and Nephi on the large and small plates, respectively) begs for detailed analysis. From this perspective, the principal object of study is the text itself, whose structure reveals some of the most telling insights into the authors’ literary purposes.

This study adds to an understanding of the ways in which the structure of the Book of Mormon narrative can be considered spiritually significant. Further studies of the narrative’s structure will certainly reveal additional insights into the richness and profundity of the scriptural text and the process of its editorial development.
BY JOSEPH SMITH, JUNIOR,
AUTHOR AND PROPRIETOR:

PALMYRA:
PRINTED BY & B. GRANDIN, FOR THE AUTHOR.
1830.
Recovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: An Interim Review

INTRODUCTION

M. GERALD BRADFORD

In 2001 Royal Skousen published carefully prepared typographical facsimiles of the original and printer’s manuscripts of the Book of Mormon and thereby launched a long-term study of the text. Other scholars, doing comparable work with original manuscripts of other Latter-day Saint scripture, in particular the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham, are following in Skousen’s footsteps. By studying the Book of Mormon manuscripts and 20 significant editions of the text from 1830 to 1981, Skousen is seeking to determine, as accurately as possible, the English-language translation of this scripture as Joseph originally received it.

Following Skousen’s initial publications on the manuscripts are his analytical studies that will eventually treat all significant textual variants in the publishing history of the Book of Mormon. The first of these, published by FARMS in 2004, is Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part 1: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10. The Journal invited five scholars to review this volume. Each one brings a distinctive point of view when assessing the quality and character of Skousen’s investigations. On one level, these reviews celebrate the essential bedrock nature of Skousen’s work. On another, they signal that serious students of the Book of Mormon cannot afford to overlook his findings, especially when undertaking any kind of study based on the text itself.
A
ll these scholarly resources being brought to bear by Royal Skousen to sort out the whosoever and whomsoever may strike some as excessive. And indeed, if the principal purpose of the Book of Mormon is to bear witness of Christ and, secondarily, Joseph his prophet, it is doubtful that anything Skousen brings to light will substantially—or even moderately—affect those missions. On the other hand, it is a mark of how seriously a people and profession take their literature when they step back from merely affective engagement with it to lay more solid foundations for its study, interpretation, and appreciation. And in this case, there is something almost devotional in the painstaking care with which Skousen attempts to reconstruct the textual layers that constitute the Book of Mormon’s history and identity.

The poet, wrote Percy Shelley in an essay published the same year as the third edition of the Book of Mormon, “apprehend[s] . . . the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression.” Coming at the height of the Romantic revolution, Shelley’s is an epochal recognition that what philosophers had for two millennia derided as the failure of art was actually its glory. Art, its mimetic impulse and aspirations notwithstanding, is never under any circumstances a successfully transparent reconstitution of a Platonic ideal. The subjectivity of personal perception, and the mediating materials through which the artist must render his or her vision, each intrude upon the representational process, leading to a product that is always ontologically and experientially distinct.

Top left: The original manuscript of the Book of Mormon beginning at Alma 42:39. Photo courtesy of the Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Top right: The printer’s manuscript at 3 Nephi 21. Photo courtesy of the Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.
from the original model. That, says Shelley, is what makes art, art. It is the source of its beauty, not its flawed insufficiency. Or, as Ortega will restate the case a century later, the particular (and inevitable) ways in which any aesthetic rendering distorts the original object is what constitutes that thing called style, which is the essential determinant of all art.\(^2\)

The Romantic triumph over the straitjacket of classical conceptions of artistic imitation was possible only because in the new universe introduced by Immanuel Kant’s epistemology, human subjectivity and human point of view became the center of gravity. In other words, neither philosophers nor artists continued to labor under the supposed burden of a fallen and distorting human perspective, which we strive to overcome in order to achieve some objective, impersonal, and absolute grasp of a transcendent reality. So our human perspective, since it is inseparable from our human condition, provides not a distortion of the real but the only avenue to the real that is humanly relevant.

In this same era, Horace Bushnell was applying similar insights to a revolutionary understanding of biblical inspiration. “Is there any hope for theological science left? None at all, I answer most unequivocally. Human language is a gift to the imagination so essentially metaphorical... that it has no exact blocks of meaning to build up a science of. Who would ever think of building up a science of Homer, Shakespeare, Milton? And the Bible is not a whit less poetic, or a whit less metaphorical, or a particle less difficult to be propositionalized in the terms of the understanding.”\(^3\)

The parallels between these issues and certain matters related to Book of Mormon translation seem striking. For in scriptural interpretation, the first question we must settle is how we sort out the meanings of and relationships among concepts like Truth, Meaning, Intention. Or to use Shelley’s language, how do we understand the relationship between “existence and perception” and “perception and expression” when it comes to God’s word?

I make this lengthy prologue in order to suggest that before we get to the work of establishing a critical text proper, a number of issues and definitions must first be resolved, and they turn out, upon close inspection, to be more complicated than they first appear. In this instance, the divine provenance, the uncertain working of translation, as well as the method of dictation all combine to vastly complicate this project and distinguish it, methodologically and philosophically, from, say, the work of recuperating a Shakespeare original text. To do the latter, one need argue about little more than orthography. If Shakespeare wrote the manuscript, then we have his original manuscript as it flowed from his pen and as he, apparently, willed it in the form it took under his own act of writing and self-supervision.

If the objective of a Book of Mormon critical text were simply to reconstitute as accurately as possible the original manuscript, that would be a fairly straightforward task. And one could envision that as a sufficient aim. Let’s get back, we could say, to the closest thing we have to the gold plates themselves.

Since Skousen believes that the Book of Mormon was “revealed to Joseph Smith word for word,” the original text would be the total flow of words discerned upon the surface of the seer stone. And in such a process of dictation—and this is important—the first opening for error or alteration would be the gap between Joseph’s recitation and the scribe’s transcription.

which is the original manuscript as dictated by Joseph and recorded by his scribes. The problem with that approach is that there are cases in which the manuscript does not reflect what Joseph most probably pronounced (as in homophonic miscues that may not always have been corrected—as in the straiten/straighten instances). In his earlier report of 2002, Skousen defines the “original [English] text” a little more problematically as what Joseph “read off the text” he received through the instrumentality of the Urim and Thummim.\(^4\) Since Skousen believes that the Book of Mormon was “revealed to Joseph Smith word for word,”\(^5\) the original text would be the total flow of words discerned upon the surface of the seer stone. And in such a process of dictation—and this is important—the first opening for error or alteration would be the gap between Joseph’s recitation and the scribe’s transcription. Joseph dictates, Oliver mishears and/or miswrites. Questionable aspects of
the original manuscript would therefore have to be read against what it is more likely that Joseph actually spoke than what Oliver or another scribe wrote.

But in the published volume recently released, Skousen modifies—or perhaps merely clarifies—his definition of original text with significant implications. In his prefatory remarks, Skousen makes this very different point: “the term ‘original text’ refers to the English-language text that Joseph received by revelation, but not necessarily to what Joseph dictated.” Now this is an important distinction. Notice that in this case the “original English text” acquires a kind of Platonic status, as an urtext that transcends and precedes even prophetic articulation. It is the immediate, fully determinate (“word by word” and even “letter by letter”), supernaturally communicated utterance that Skousen is not sure even survives Joseph’s own processing. Skousen even strikingly evokes Plato when he characterizes the 1830 edition as “thrice removed from the original text.”

This long chain of transmission (the Urim and Thummim’s text, Joseph’s utterance, scribal transcription, printer’s copy) certainly expands the opportunities for error, idiosyncrasy, and subjectivity to creep into the occasion. But why stop with four layers? We also have, to use one example from the other end of the process, heaven-sent impressions, Isaiah’s understanding of those impressions, dictation or recording of Isaiah’s prophecies, copying/editing onto brass plates, editing/copying onto Nephite plates, Abinadi’s reading of the record to Noah, Alma’s recollection of Abinadi’s recitation, Alma’s understanding of Abinadi’s words, Alma’s transcription, Mormon’s editing of Alma, and so forth.

The resulting English text that we have is a curious prophetic patois that reflects human and historical influences across the spectrum of this convoluted process: Hebraisms that are inexplicable in Joseph Smith’s grammatical universe, elements that reflect “the biblical style from the 1500s,” elements that are clearly “identical to the style of the King James Bible” (1611), and passages that “also show examples of Joseph Smith’s upstate New York English.” The presence of both Hebraisms and Joseph’s belabored spellings suggest a prepackaged text that he “saw.” The presence of New York regional dialect would suggest that he sometimes took liberties in recasting what he saw in language more conformable to his speech patterns. The presence of 16th-century elements would suggest tantalizing possibilities too far in the realm of speculation to pursue. At least they would be if Joseph had not himself offered other hints that the Book of Mormon is here an axiomatic instance of the fact that revelation tends to be text-centered and text-based. It’s just a question of having access to the best texts available, transmitted and even translated in the least prejudicial way possible. Speaking of “the Vision,” for instance, he wrote:

Nothing could be more pleasing to the Saints upon the order of the kingdom of the Lord, than the light which burst upon the world through the foregoing vision. Every law, every commandment, every promise, every truth, and every point touching the destiny of man, from Genesis to Revelation, where the purity of the scriptures remains unsullied by the folly of men, go to show the perfection of the theory [of different degrees of glory in the future life] and witnesses the fact that that document is a transcript from the records of the eternal world.

Now regardless of how far we want to push these tantalizing hints about texts that come closer to some heavenly, original fulness, the point is that in Skousen’s work, he finds a frame of ultimate reference in the text itself, thus skirting problems of intentionality and other layers of originality. Of course, all good textual criticism ultimately must appeal to the text as the only accessible arbiter of meaning: I simply want to indicate that Skousen presumes unusually complex levels of textual coherence and consistency, and brings them to bear on disputed readings in an extremely able and comprehensive fashion. I want to look closely at Skousen’s approach to resolving one disputed reading in particular as an example of this method.

In 1 Nephi 4:5, the current version reads “and I caused that they should hide themselves without the walls.” The original manuscript records wall in the singular. The printer’s manuscript and every edition adds an s to make it walls. There is no immediately compelling reason to dispute the original manuscript singular. Skousen even finds two subsequent, and proximate, instances where the singular form wall is repeated (see 1 Nephi 4:24; 4:27). Importantly, these three instances in O (original manuscript) are recorded in the hands of scribes 2 and 3. There is, in other words, no reason to dispute a grammatically acceptable form—the singular wall—that is consis-
tent both in terms of appearance and across varying scribal authorship. Skousen would at this point be justified in endorsing the reading of O and attributing all subsequent emendations to a following of scribe 1’s (Oliver Cowdery’s) change in P (printer’s manuscript) introduced as stylistic preference.

But considering the dropping of a plural s a potential scribal error, Skousen in fact finds such a pattern of error in both scribe 2 and scribe 3. And looking for other appearances of the expression “without the wall(s),” Skousen finds two. First Nephi 4:4 records “without the walls of Jerusalem,” and Mosiah 21:19 indicates “without the walls of the city.” In this light, Skousen has a pattern of scribal error that would account for a dropped plural s and two readings that also support the likelihood of a dropped s in these particular contexts. The case seems tight.

It is therefore all the more impressive when Skousen notes that the supporting examples of plural walls are both followed by prepositional phrases starting with of (“of Jerusalem” and “of the city”). However, the disputed passages contain no such prepositional phrases. The bulk of evidence still suggests that the disputed passage of 1 Nephi 4:5 should contain the singular form wall, unless one can find evidence that the Book of Mormon sometimes omits to pluralize wall when it is followed by a prepositional phrase beginning with of. That is certainly not an exception that one could readily or intuitively associate with a grammatical rule transposed from English. And Skousen does not here choose to address the relevance of Hebrew constructions. What he can do is look for a comparable pattern in the translated text that would differentiate singular and plural nouns on the basis of following prepositional phrases. And that is precisely what he finds, in two very comparable passages (comparable because gate is a term so similar to wall and in both cases the passages describe the positional relationship of characters to those nouns). So what we have by way of analogy is “I myself was with my guards without the gate” and “the king having been without the gates of the city” (Mosiah 7:10 and 21:23). Because the Book of Mormon text is systematic in this regard, Skousen can make a compelling case for restoring the original singular wall to 1 Nephi 4.

This strikes me as more than just careful editorial work. This is a brilliantly fashioned argument that is carefully reasoned, meticulously argued, and reliant upon the best kind of intellectual effort: because he gives both readings the full benefit of the doubt, conceives hypotheses that substantiate both readings, and scours the text for corroborating evidence. And he repeats this procedure hundreds of times.

One may disagree with individual conclusions. But one cannot come away less than profoundly impressed by the efforts to which Skousen goes to analyze each and every disputed reading. He has provided us all with a model of the best textual scholarship we have seen, and it comes at a fortuitous juncture, when the Joseph Smith Papers Project is about to add further to the critical mass of scholarship that does not just make our sacred texts available to the world, but will testify to the world, by the way we hold them, that they are not accounted by us a light thing.
English Editions of the Book of Mormon
1830–1981

Translation is completed. Printer’s manuscript prepared.

First visit of Moroni to Joseph Smith. Joseph views the plates in the Hill Cumorah.

First Edition Palmyra, New York

Joseph receives the plates from Moroni.

Kirtland, Ohio

Nauvoo, Illinois

Liverpool, England

Liverpool, England

New York City (Wright)

Liverpool, England

Plano, Illinois (RLDS)

Salt Lake City, Utah

Liverpool, England

Lamoni, Iowa (RLDS)

Liverpool, England

Liverpool, England

Liverpool, England

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To facilitate his analysis of the textual variants of the Book of Mormon, Royal Skousen prepared a computerized collation for the entire text that lists every variant for the two manuscripts and 20 significant editions of the book. Photos of Book of Mormon editions courtesy of Mark Philbrick. Photos of title pages courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
I first became aware of Royal Skousen’s Book of Mormon critical text project when it was in its infancy. I have tried to keep current on this landmark study by reading his reports and attending his lectures. The large amount of detail occasioned by the many types of variants he has encountered in both the handwritten manuscripts and the printed texts could be overwhelming, and I have marveled that he has been able to contain all of it. His objectivity, his research plan, and his format for clearly reporting and interpreting his findings are noteworthy. Pursuit of knowledge by the methods of literary criticism is fascinating and enlightening, but it can also be mind-wearying. To do what Skousen has done requires a particular type of personality equipped with a number of acquired skills, and I am grateful that he has the linguistic ability, technical know-how, mental and physical stamina, and long-range commitment to carry forth his magnificent obsession.

“Truth Yields to Investigation”

To encourage faculty to engage in original research, former Brigham Young University academic vice president Jae R. Ballif declared that “truth yields to investigation,” a statement I assume was original with him. Professor Skousen’s work confirms Ballif’s observation. Skousen’s careful analysis of the prepublication manuscripts, and of at least 20 subsequent editions of the Book of Mormon, has yielded a plethora of information and has provided viewpoints that could not have been obtained any other way. I do not mean to imply that no one else has worked at such a project with the Book of Mormon, but I think that Skousen has been the most thorough.
A textual critic is actually a “literary archaeologist” who digs into the strata below the surface of the printed page and uncovers history that is out of sight to those who do not deal with original material. It is surprising how much an original source can tell about the writer and also the processes engaged in the development of the text. Many examples could be given, but they are readily available in Skousen’s critical text. A perusal of his reports is worth the effort. This brief essay discusses the contributions that make Skousen’s study meaningful.

The Most Significant Contribution

Professor Skousen’s analysis shows that thousands of variations in wording and spelling and even some omissions have occurred in the manuscripts and in the many printings of the Book of Mormon. His work also shows that most of these variations are of little consequence to the message of the Book of Mormon; that is, they do not endanger doctrine, and the book remains a “testament of Jesus Christ.” Nay-saying authors have endeavored to make a case against the Book of Mormon, and thus against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, by exploiting the fact that many textual variants exist in the publishing history of the book. These authors claim that such variants greatly affect meaning. The most significant contribution of Skousen’s work is that Latter-day Saints now can frankly acknowledge that many variants have occurred, that they are known and each has been carefully examined, and that the evaluation shows that they are, for the most part, of slight substantive consequence, often being matters of grammatical usage and style.

It is important to note that the variant readings in the Book of Mormon have occurred over a wide number of editions and printings. Furthermore, because the prepublication manuscripts are extant for some portions of the text, most of the variants have been corrected, with the result that the 1981 edition is the most nearly correct that has ever been published, even though Skousen’s study indicates that a few more corrections would be in order.

Why Variants Occur

Human fallibility enters into the making of every lengthy handwritten document, whether it is an original or a copy. Writing from dictation invites errors of hearing and judgment. A word can easily be mistaken for another that sounds the same but has different meaning and, of course, different spelling. And whenever material is copied by hand, there is a risk that words, phrases, or entire sentences will inadvertently be repeated, confused, or omitted. Such errors of sight and judgment are especially possible when consecutive phrases or sentences have similar beginnings (homoioarchton) or similar endings (homoioteleuton). Furthermore, various kinds of errors tend to increase when the抄ist is weary, such as misreading poor penmanship or struggling with a word and making an error in judgment as to what it means.

Professor Skousen’s work shows that every kind of error I have described was made by the scribes and copyists of the prepublication manuscripts of the Book of Mormon and by the typesetters in the printing of the book. Skousen has discovered, evaluated, and reported these changes to the original text. Errors are so common in copies of text prepared by mortal hands that ancient Jewish scholars prepared extensive, intricate, mathematically based rules to enable scribes to keep variants to a minimum and to make them easy to detect. In the case of biblical manuscripts, textual experts speak to two classes of variants: planned and unplanned. Planned variants (usually omissions) are the most serious because they are selective, often doctrinally significant, and quickly accomplished. In the matter of Book of Mormon variants, I know of no planned omissions except the 116 pages of stolen manuscript. The thousands of variants that Skousen deals with are, I believe, the unplanned kind. It is important that such errors be discovered and corrected so they will not be passed on and preserved as valid text. Fortunately, the original dictated manuscript is at least one-fourth extant, and Oliver Cowdery’s copy is virtually extant. Therefore, the intended text can be ascertained in most instances, except where the manuscripts occasionally seem to be in error.

“Translated by the Gift and Power of God”

A second major contribution of Skousen’s work, and one that is basic to the entire project, is the increased understanding of the translation process. The Prophet Joseph Smith’s statement that he translated the Book of Mormon by the “gift and power of
God” declares that divine inspiration was involved but does not define or explain the process or processes. The Urim and Thummim were prepared by the Lord “for the purpose of translating the book” (Joseph Smith—History 1:35). We have every necessary assurance that the Book of Mormon was translated by divine means, but no explanation of precisely how it was accomplished.

I have often cogitated on the Prophet Joseph’s refusal in October 1831 to explain more fully to the elders of the Church the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Although the “how” of translation is not specifically mentioned, it is implied in the overall request and refusal. I do not see the Prophet’s refusal as a prohibition against faithful believers seeking to understand more about the process of translation; rather, the fine points of how the Book of Mormon was translated were not for the unbelieving world to know.

The Urim and Thummim

As noted earlier, the Urim and Thummim were an essential part of the translation process, at least at the outset, but precisely how they functioned is not known. We know they had some special relation to the breastplate (see JS—H 1:35, 52), and they probably had several functions. We read that Joseph Smith was given “sight and power” to translate (Doctrine and Covenants 3:12). The word sight suggests visual images, but power is not defined and could mean mental acuity, spiritual perception, and mental images, as distinct from physical sight. Abraham looked at the stars with his Urim and Thummim and saw things not discernible to natural eyes (see Abraham 3:1–2). As part of the revelatory experience, Abraham stated, “And the Lord said unto me, by the Urim and Thummim, that . . .” (Abraham 3:4). Is the word said to be taken literally? If so, do the Urim and Thummim function audibly as well as visually and mentally? And if not, why not? I think we must not limit the range of miraculous workings of any divine instrument prepared by the Lord for the use of his servants, whether it is the Urim and Thummim, the “seer stone,” the Liahona, or the silver cup by which Joseph of Egypt divined (see Genesis 44:1–5, 15). I regard the Urim and Thummim that Joseph Smith used as a multioperational and nonautomatic divine instrument, and no human can understand how it works unless he has actually used it himself.

The term Urim and Thummim does not occur in the Book of Mormon text. Instead, this divine instrument is referred to therein as “interpreters” used by prophets to receive revelation and translate languages. These interpreters are described in the Book of Mormon in much the same terminology as that used by Joseph Smith to describe the Urim and Thummim: “two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow . . . for the purpose of interpreting languages” (Mosiah 28:13–14; compare JS—H 1:35).

Incidentally, the particular wording of the passage in Mosiah is especially interesting, pointedly referring to “those two stones” as though the reader should already know about them, yet there is no previous mention in the Book of Mormon to any such “two stones.” This anomaly may be the consequence of the Book of Mormon being an abridgment or perhaps of the lost 116 pages of manuscript, which may have mentioned the stones. Another possibility is that since the “two stones” are specifically spoken of in Ether 3:23, 28 and King Mosiah had translated the Jaredite record, he may have referred to the stones in light of that source, even though the expression had not yet appeared within the Nephite records.

Other Examples of Translation or Interpretation

In the Book of Mormon it appears that the words interpreting and translating are used synonymously (see Mosiah 28:13–17); however, in the strictest sense they are not of identical meaning, as the following examples will illustrate. 

Doctrine and Covenants 7. The term translation as used in latter-day scripture and by the Prophet Joseph Smith seems to have considerable flexibility, evidently conveying a focus on underlying meaning rather than on the exact words of the source document being translated. The text of Doctrine and Covenants 7, a case in point, is germane to the
translation of the Book of Mormon because that section was produced in April 1829 during the period of intense translation activity with the Book of Mormon. Doctrine and Covenants 7 is Joseph Smith’s translation, using the Urim and Thummim, of words written by John the Revelator on a piece of parchment hidden up by himself. The reason for translating this document was to ascertain whether John remained on earth in the flesh or had died. When the Prophet inquired of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim, he probably did not know of the parchment’s existence. Yet this text-based revelation was the Lord’s way of answering. The translation affirms that John was to tarry without death until the Lord’s second coming. When first printed in the Book of Commandments in 1833, as chapter VI, it consisted of 176 words. When printed in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, as section XXXIII, it had been enlarged to 289 words, including new concepts relating to John’s ministry. No explanation is given to account for the longer version, which still purports to be a translation of John’s parchment.

Malachi 4:5–6. A similar type of flexibility is seen in the way Moroni quoted Malachi 4:5–6 to Joseph Smith. The biblical text of Malachi 4:5 reads, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” Moroni’s quotation of that same verse reads, “Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet . . .” (JS—H 1:38). Malachi 4:6 reads, “And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers,” whereas Moroni’s words read, “And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers” (JS—H 1:39).
Interestingly, the Book of Mormon passages of Malachi 4:5–6 follow the biblical version, not Moroni’s (see 3 Nephi 25), as does Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible. Both Malachi’s and Moroni’s versions are correct. Moroni’s utterance conveys the greater meaning and may be more in the category of an interpretation than a strict translation. When talking about “translation” in the scriptural sense, we really mean “revelation” and not the narrower, traditional meaning of translation, which is limited to rendering the words on a page into another language.

A Spectrum of Light

Translation is a means to an end. I like the practical definition given in the treatise “The Translators to the Reader,” published in early editions of the King James Bible. It reads in part: “Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; . . . that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water; . . . without translation . . . [we] are but like children at Jacob’s well (which was deep) without a bucket or something to draw with.”

I venture to suggest that translation in its best sense could be likened to the spectrum of color that occurs when a beam of light shines through a glass prism. The ray of light entering the prism is colorless to the eye, but when it is “translated” by the prism, seven colors become visible. Each color was inherent in the clear ray of light, but in that condition the colors were not apparent to the human eye. In like manner, a translation by divine revelation is able to make known essential meanings pertaining to what is being translated even if every specific word is not in the original.

The Holy Spirit as Translator

The Prophet Joseph Smith reported that after his baptism in May 1829 and the subsequent enlightenment of his mind by the Holy Ghost, the scriptures were laid “open to [his] understanding, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed . . . in a manner which [he] never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of” (JS—H 1:74). This declaration is all the more significant when we realize that the Prophet had already translated a major portion of the Book of Mormon by the “gift and power of God” via the Urim and Thummim before receiving the new enlightenment by the Holy Ghost.

The minutes for a meeting in Salt Lake City on January 14, 1871, record, “He [Elder Pratt] mentioned that as Joseph used the Urim and Thummim in the translation of the Book of Mormon, he wondered why he did not use it in the translation of the New Testament. Joseph explained to him that the experience he had acquired while translating the Book of Mormon by the use of the Urim and Thummim had rendered him so well acquainted with the Spirit of Revelation and Prophecy, that in the translating of the New Testament he did not need the aid that was necessary in the 1st instance.” It thus appears that the Holy Spirit, operating in concert with the experience of a divinely appointed translator, may even supersede the role of a tangible divine instrument such as the Urim and Thummim.

Divine Enterprise, Human Effort

The Lord could have given Joseph Smith the Book of Mormon without gold plates or Urim and Thummim. He could have manufactured a perfect, finished product in heaven and handed it to us. But that would have seriously impaired our responsibility to understand a principle of life by which the Lord works with humans. There seems to be an eternal law of growth that requires each person to do everything possible toward his or her own salvation. Of necessity there had to be gold plates and the Urim and Thummim, and the Prophet had to labor with diligence to translate. The scribes had to labor to record, and the typesetter had to labor to set type and to print. Similarly, readers must struggle to gain full understanding. Anything less would lack reality, and conviction would be shallow and experience and growth nonexistent. These factors are important enough that they could not be ignored even at the risk of human error entering into the text of the Book of Mormon. Naturally we desire to have a Book of Mormon free from error. However, since 1830 the Holy Spirit has testified to millions of readers that the message and doctrine of the Book of Mormon are true, even though every copy that every person has ever read has manifested some technical error in the wording.
English-speaking Latter-day Saints who desire a thorough understanding of the Book of Mormon face a considerable challenge—the text is written in English. As a result, it is too easy to read. That is to say, it is too easy to get the gist of what is being communicated without actually taking the time to analyze every verb form, every pronoun, and every conjunction to determine exactly how the words fit together and the ideas unfold. We grasp the general message, but we also miss many of the details. In fact, the people who know the Book of Mormon best may be those who have translated it into another language or who as nonnative speakers are trying to read it in English.

Latter-day Saints who have studied Greek or Hebrew know that it is not difficult to spend 20 minutes or more on a single verse of the Bible—working out the possible meanings of the words, making sure all the grammatical parts fit together, and trying to figure out how a slightly different construction might change the meaning. This level of scrutiny is simply not possible for someone reading the Book of Mormon as if it were a sacrament meeting talk. (Another analogy would be the difference between listening to a piece of music and actually learning to play it.)

If you have not taken the opportunity before, look at the Anchor Bible commentary. There is usually one volume for each book in the Bible, and most public libraries have at least a few of these on their shelves. Each volume consists of new translations of short passages of scripture followed by two commentaries, one of which focuses on the actual words and the other on the main ideas. The level of attention to individual words in the notes section is often breathtaking, perhaps reflecting the
seriousness of religious traditions that view scripture rather than modern revelation as the primary avenue to understanding God’s will. By contrast, most commentaries on the Book of Mormon move rather quickly from the details of the text to larger theological issues. We just assume that we have all the words we need and that we know what they mean.

That cavalier attitude is about to change. Royal Skousen, building on the foundation of his definitive work on the original and printer’s manuscripts, called O and P, has begun to publish a commentary on the text of the Book of Mormon that will forever change the way Latter-day Saints approach modern scripture. Two hundred years from now—long after people have stopped reading anything on the Book of Mormon now in print—students of the Book of Mormon will still be poring over Skousen’s work. What he has accomplished is nothing short of phenomenal.

Royal Skousen’s Book of Mormon critical text project, which has been ongoing for almost 20 years, will eventually consist of five volumes (most of which are divided into several book-length “parts”). The first volume is a typographic facsimile of the original manuscript, and the second—in two parts—is a reproduction of the printer’s manuscript. These were both published in 2001. Still to come are volume 3, which will provide both a detailed grammar of the original Book of Mormon and Skousen’s comments on what the manuscript evidence tells us about the translation process; and volume 5, a collation of the two manuscripts and 20 significant printed editions showing every difference among them. This volume will also include Skousen’s reconstructed original version of the text.

The newest installment in the series is the first part of volume 4, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10. This is a large book of 650 pages, but five more books of similar length will follow to complete the fourth volume. Strong opinions require strong arguments, and this is particularly the case with this book, which at first glance can seem both over-
whelmingly convoluted and impossibly focused on inconsequential minutia.

The accurate reproduction and transcription of the two key Book of Mormon manuscripts seem reasonable enough. Scholars will want to consult these books to make sure that their own analyses of particular passages are not based on copying errors or later editorial changes. By saving them the trouble of having to go to Church archives to examine the actual manuscripts, Skousen has contributed to the long-term preservation of these fragile documents. In addition, by using the latest scientific techniques—including multispectral imaging and new ultraviolet photographs—he has seen more in these pages than anyone ever has before. Volumes 1 and 2 are extremely useful as reference tools, but it is unlikely that many people would want to read them straight through. With volume 4, however, things get more interesting.

Skousen’s goal has been to use recognized, proven methods of scholarly analysis to get as close as possible to the moment when Joseph Smith, translating the Book of Mormon through the Urim and Thummim, first spoke the words of the Nephite record out loud so that his scribes could write them down. The evidence at hand includes fragments of the original manuscript, which was written directly from Joseph’s dictation (28 percent still survives); the printer’s manuscript, which Oliver Cowdery copied from the original manuscript for the use of E. B. Grandin and Co. (nearly all of this is extant); and 20 significant editions ranging from the first edition of 1830 to our current 1981 edition (including several editions published by the Community of Christ, formerly known as the RLDS Church). Skousen has painstakingly compared these manuscripts and editions and noted every single difference. His task, then, has been to reconstruct the sequence of events that resulted in variants he has identified. In so doing, he can work backwards toward the first moment of translation; that is,
toward the exact words that were revealed through Joseph Smith.

An example can clarify Skousen's method. Before the first verse of 1 Nephi is a preface—set in italics—that was translated from the plates. One of Skousen's entries on this preface reads as follows:

*they call [ 1ABDEFJLMNOPQRS | the name of CGHKT] the place Bountiful*

This means that the printer's manuscript (= 1) and most editions (1830 = A, 1837 = B, etc.) have “they call the place Bountiful,” while a few editions (including 1840 = C and 1981 = T) read “they call the name of the place Bountiful.” How did this difference come about? Skousen believes that Joseph Smith, in making revisions for the third (1840) edition, went back to the original manuscript and discovered that a phrase had been accidentally omitted when the printer's copy was made. Consequently, it was also omitted from the first and second printed editions. Though Joseph restored it in 1840, the correction was lost in the next edition and most editions thereafter. It does, however, appear in our current official edition, which is noteworthy for the care with which the editorial committee tried to incorporate readings from the original manuscript and from Joseph Smith's corrections.

At this point, a thoughtful reader might ask, “How does Skousen know the phrase *the name of* appeared in the original manuscript, especially since that part of the manuscript is no longer extant? Couldn't Joseph Smith have added it as a clarification?” The answer is that Skousen doesn't know for certain, but he is very careful (and very conservative) in his arguments. When faced with a variation among the editions, he first asks, “Does it make a difference in the meaning?” In this case, the answer is no, which makes it *less* likely that Joseph felt a need to add a clarification. Instead, he probably was simply bringing back an omitted phrase. This hypothesis is strengthened when Skousen offers three examples of Joseph Smith doing exactly this in the 1840 edition—that is, restoring phrases from the original manuscript—and in all three instances the original manuscript is still extant, so we can observe directly what has happened. Furthermore, Skousen notes that this same mistake, where the phrase *the name of* was accidentally left out, also occurred at Mosiah 24:20, and he speculates that this could have happened because the Book of Mormon, like the Bible, includes examples of both “call the name of X Y” (six times) and “call X Y” (three times).

**Establishing the Original Text**

Yet here another reader may ask, “Why bother? Why spend a page and a half analyzing a change that doesn't make any difference in the meaning?” But this is to misunderstand Skousen's intentions. His primary objective is to recover, as far as is humanly possible, the original text of the Book of Mormon as it was first revealed to Joseph Smith. To do so he eliminates all the accidental changes that were introduced by the processes of hearing dictation, transcribing, copying, and typesetting, as well as the later editorial modifications that made the book easier to read (these were mostly minor grammatical and stylistic revisions). Every word matters, and it is appropriate to treat a divinely revealed text—a gift from God—with such meticulous attention to detail. Indeed, this is scholarship as devotion in its purest form.

In part 1 of volume 4, which covers the title page through 2 Nephi 10, Skousen analyzes 774 variants. His proposed original text for these chapters differs from the current 1981 edition in 420 cases, though of these only 75 make any difference in meaning—and never in doctrine. Here we are simply speaking of slight changes in wording that would be reflected in a translation into another language. (Note that the 1981 edition was not attempt to reconstruct the original text with all of its gram-
matical peculiarities; our modern, official version needs to read smoothly, in addition to being doctrinally sound and true to Joseph’s translation.) Of the 420 cases, 263 have already appeared in earlier editions, and nearly all of the 157 new readings he proposes are based on his analysis of the original and printer’s manuscripts.

For readers with scholarly sensibilities, it is a delight to watch Skousen at work. (For those with less patience and interest, he conveniently summarizes his conclusions at the end of each discussion.) First, he identifies variants in the manuscripts and editions, including issues of tense, number, articles, prepositions, conjunctions, subject-verb agreement, capitalization, punctuation (where it affects meaning), spelling, and plurals. Next he scrupulously examines all the evidence available, including the ink flow on the manuscripts, cross-outs, additions, whether corrections are written above the line of the text or whether they are in the line itself (indicating an immediate correction), erasures, changes that were made in specific editions or even midway through a printing, and so forth. He then tries to imagine the sequence of physical events that would have led to what he sees in his sources—which changes were intentional or accidental, who made them, and when they were made (for instance, when he was making a copy for the printer, Oliver Cowdery sometimes corrected what he thought were mistakes in the original manuscript, though this assumption was not always accurate). Skousen then supports his hypotheses with rational arguments based on handwriting, comparisons with other passages elsewhere, statistics, biblical parallels, biblical usage or dialects, the writing habits of particular scribes, pronunciation (some mistakes were made in dictation because words sounded alike), typical errors of the eye or hand in copying, or the fact that awkward, but intelligible readings are more likely than not to be original.

Forgive a lengthy quotation, but Skousen’s work has to be seen to be appreciated. In explaining what he observes in the two manuscripts for 1 Nephi 19:16, Skousen writes:

It appears that Oliver Cowdery first wrote “the prophets Zenos” in the original manuscript and then did not correct it until months later when he was copying from O [the original manuscript] into P [the printer’s manuscript]. The plural s was probably the result of Oliver misinterpreting Joseph Smith’s dictation of “the words of the prophet Zenos”. Oliver was probably expecting “the words of the prophets”, which occurs 14 times in the Book of Mormon. It would have been very difficult to hear the difference between “the prophet Zenos” and “the prophets Zenos”, so it would have been hard to catch this error when Oliver read back the text to Joseph. This kind of s addition sometimes occurs when the following word begins with a sibilant sound (such as /s/, /z/, or /ʃ/). Oliver made this same kind of mistake in Alma 41:14 when he took down Joseph’s dictation for “my son see” as “my sons see” (see the discussion under Alma 41:14).

When Oliver Cowdery copied the text for this passage from O into P, he initially wrote “the Prophets Zenos” in the printer’s manuscript. Realizing that the word prophet should be in the singular, he erased the s in the printer’s manuscript, then apparently turned to correct O so that it would agree with P. But for some reason he also crossed out Zenos, as if he were correcting O to read “according to the words of the prophets”, a distinct possibility but wrong in this case. Instead of rewriting the name Zenos, Oliver tried to erase the crossout lines, but only at the beginning of the name Zenos. He realized he had correctly copied the name into P, so it was unnecessary to fully correct O. In the end,
he crossed out the plural s of prophets in O with a heavier ink flow. (He probably dipped his pen after having tried to erase the crossing out of Zenos.)

If Oliver Cowdery had crossed out Zenos originally when Joseph Smith was dictating the manuscript, he probably wouldn’t have accidentally written it a second time when producing the printer’s manuscript. It seems very likely that Joseph Smith read off the name Zenos; adding Zenos by accident seems highly unlikely since there is no nearby occurrence of this (or any other) prophet’s name. (The name Zenos last occurred in verse 12, on the previous manuscript page of O.) Moreover, nowhere else in either manuscript does Oliver Cowdery (or any other scribe) accidentally add a name after writing the word prophet.\(^1\)

The discussion actually continues a bit longer, and all this for a reading that has been correct in every printed edition! But never before have we been taken so close to the actual physical and mental labor of those long days in 1829 when Joseph and Oliver were translating the Book of Mormon, writing out the text by hand, copying it, and getting it ready for publication. It’s almost as if we were privileged to be looking over their shoulders as they work. (For another example, see pp. 581–86 [2 Nephi 7:2–6], where Skousen believes that Oliver became tired while copying from O into P—he made six mistakes in five verses.)

Skousen is a scholar’s scholar. He examines everything, his arguments are meticulously reasoned, he uses all the available resources of modern academia, he is generous (often giving credit to students who came up with possible readings),\(^2\) he always gives full consideration to alternative explanations and inconvenient evidence, and he seems willing to go wherever the evidence leads. He identifies some Hebraisms, for instance, but he also rejects a number of possible cases. He keeps the original grammar, even when it is not correct by the standards of modern English. Just as important, he doesn’t go beyond what the evidence allows. He considers interesting possibilities—for example, devoting two and a half pages to whether the phrase “yielded himself” at 1 Nephi 19:10 should in fact be “yielded himself up”—only to reject them in the end if he does not believe there is enough evidence to warrant their inclusion in a final, critical text. (It is worth repeating that Skousen is very conservative in his judgments.) As a historian who has spent his professional life working with critical editions of ancient texts, my response to Skousen’s book is awe and humility. For all Latter-day Saints who love the Book of Mormon, profound gratitude is in order.

Although it is customary in reviews to offer criticism as well as praise, I have been hard-pressed to find places where I can fault Skousen’s methods or results (even typographical errors are very rare—something unusual in a book as complicated and detailed as this one). This will have to suffice:
Skousen does not always give adequate attention to biblical parallels. For instance, in his discussion of 2 Nephi 4:5, “for behold I know that if ye are brought up in the [right] way that ye should go ye will not depart from it,” he suggests that “Joseph Smith deleted the word right probably because it seemed obvious that ‘the way that ye should go’ is ‘the right way’”. It seems more likely to me that Joseph was influenced by the familiar parallel from Proverbs 22:6 (unmentioned by Skousen): “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (emphasis added). Skousen goes on to list four similar instances of “the right way(s)” in the Book of Mormon:

and all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord (1 Nephi 13:27)

and that great whore which hath perverted the right ways of the Lord (1 Nephi 22:14)

and all they that commit whoredoms and pervert the right way of the Lord (2 Nephi 28:15)

and ye have led away much of this people that they pervert the right way of God (Jacob 7:7)

Skousen does not notice that all these examples are derived from Acts 13:10: “wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?” (which seems to have been a favorite phrase in the Book of Mormon). It would not be unusual for a critical text to include a list of direct quotations and allusions from the Bible; I hope that Skousen will include this in a later volume. The way the Book of Mormon uses particular phrases from the King James Bible is a significant element of its style.

**Documenting Changes**

A by-product of Skousen’s scholarly reconstruction of the original Book of Mormon is conclusive evidence for the integrity of the text. Compared with most books, ancient or modern, the textual history of the Book of Mormon is crystal clear. It did not go through multiple drafts, and though there have been several thousand later changes in spelling and grammar—both inadvertent and deliberate—we generally know who made which changes when and why. We can also see that very, very few of the intentional alterations affected the meaning, and there were no revisions of the narrative. Aside from stylistic issues, the Book of Mormon as it was first dictated by Joseph to Oliver is the same book we read today. “Several thousand changes” may sound like a lot, but I have easily made that many in trying to write this short review on my word processor. Anyone who is shocked or embarrassed by Skousen’s catalog of variants doesn’t know much about writing (or about what it means to copy manuscripts by hand).

Still, there may be some who expect a perfect text because it was revealed by God. The primary difficulty with the original version is the grammar, which for some reason is not in standard English. This is a complicated issue because much of what seems ungrammatical now has been acceptable at some times and places, though not necessarily in Joseph Smith’s New England. It is a puzzle, and Skousen at this point refrains from speculation; he simply documents what he finds in the manuscripts.

The textual scholarship so ably done by Skousen fully warrants a new edition of the Book of Mormon so that all Latter-day Saints can have access to the most accurate version possible, yet this raises some delicate issues. Although the Church will surely want to correct any accidental errors that have crept into the text over the years (and it is important to note that these errors are not really different in kind from those we see in other handwritten or printed documents, including those of the Bible), they will probably not want to adopt Skousen’s critical text as a whole, for two reasons. The first is that the original Book of Mormon included a great deal of grammar that seems strange to our ears. For example, 1 Nephi 4 (a chapter taken at random and for which the original manuscript is extant) originally included these constructions:

“the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drownded in the waters of the Red Sea”

“now when I had spoken these words they was yet wroth”

“and after that I had smote off his head”

“and he supposing . . . that I was truly that Laban whom I had slew”

One might be tempted to attribute such cases to Joseph’s poor education, but the manuscripts show that the translation was revealed in a very precise manner. The Book of Mormon seems to have a unique, fairly consistent grammar of its own—not exactly King James English, not exactly
the English of Joseph Smith’s time and place, and certainly not standard modern American English. We are not sure why this is the case—perhaps the grammar contains clues as to the origins of the text—but restoring all of the original wording would undoubtedly prove distracting to many. It would make it more difficult for ordinary readers to understand and appreciate the message of the book (which, of course, would defeat the missionary purposes of the scripture).

Joseph Smith himself updated much of the grammar for the 1837 edition—it apparently sounded strange to him as well—and eliminated repetitions that he thought were unnecessary (including more than three dozen occurrences of “and it came to pass”; see Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One, p. 207). This process has continued through the 20 significant printed editions. There have been several thousand deliberate changes in the text over the years, though all but a handful were stylistic revisions of grammar rather than meaning. The few substantive changes—generally made by Joseph Smith himself in preparing the 1837 and 1840 editions—constitute the second difficulty in adopting Skousen’s critical text. The evidence is clear that Joseph’s revisions were not revealed in the same way as the original text was. He modified particular grammatical forms in some places but not in others (pp. 93, 198, 255, 299, and 550), he sometimes changed his mind and revised passages more than once (pp. 213, 286, and 330–31), he added some clarifications that probably were not necessary (p. 161), he sometimes replaced awkward constructions with equally awkward constructions (p. 478), he seems to have misunderstood the text in places (pp. 542–43), and in at least one instance he corrected the wording so that it matched a mistake that Oliver had made in copying the printer’s manuscript (p. 414). Skousen generally rejects Joseph’s revisions in order to establish the original form of the text; but because Joseph Smith, as both prophet and translator, had a unique relationship to the Book of Mormon, the Church’s Scriptures Committee will undoubtedly want to look at each of Joseph’s revisions individually to make sure that we do not lose any authentic prophetic insights.

Building to Last

At the risk of sounding like a fanatic, I believe that Skousen’s work is perhaps the most important study of the Book of Mormon ever done. By this I do not mean to disparage the inspired teachings of Church leaders and faithful scholars, but the Book of Mormon is a rich, inexhaustible text, and prophets and teachers in generations to come will continue to discern new truths and applications in its pages. There is no single definitive interpretation of the Nephite scripture. Certainly the work of scholars like Hugh Nibley has been impressive, but Nibley produced a sort of self-consuming scholarship; that is to say, it carried within itself the seeds of its own obsolescence. The sources Nibley cited in his early works are by now quite dated; academics have advanced new and improved theories about the ancient world, new evidence has emerged, and Mormon scholars have followed Nibley’s example in identifying new analytical tools and approaches that will yield better understandings of the Book of Mormon. In the 22nd century, people will read Nibley only for historical interest (much as we might today read George Reynolds’s 1888 Story of the Book of Mormon) or perhaps for literary reasons (as many will attest, Nibley was a very engaging
writer). Nibley, of course, would have wanted it so—it is a wonderful thing when scholars inspire others to outdo them. ³

By contrast, it is hard to imagine Royal Skousen’s work ever being done better. Given his narrow focus on the text, the limited number of sources in existence, and the thoroughness of his treatment, the great-grandchildren of scholars yet unborn will consult his commentaries to get as close as possible to the Book of Mormon in its original form. Just as Jewish readers still consult the work of the ancient Masorete scribes—who punctuated, pointed, and annotated the Hebrew Bible—so also Skousen’s critical text project will serve as the starting point for serious scholarship of the Book of Mormon for centuries.

I should temper my enthusiasm by noting that Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon is not in a class all by itself. Rather, it belongs to the genre of textual criticism, whose exacting standards have been worked out by two centuries of scholars laboring to produce critical editions of ancient works like Homer, Sophocles, and the Bible. ⁴ For ancient books—copied by hand for centuries—it is necessary to compare all the known manuscripts, arrange them into families (since mistakes made once will appear in every subsequent copy made from that copy), and then analyze them to determine the most probable original reading. Thus there is really no such thing as the New Testament (except as we might imagine it was first written by its authors, and those particular manuscripts are gone forever). What we actually have are dozens of relatively full manuscripts and thousands of handwritten fragments, each a little different from the others.

Many scholars have spent their entire lives trying to make sense of the documents, attempting to get as close as possible to those hypothetical originals, and any serious study of the New Testament begins with a critical edition like that of the United Bible Society, which has alternative readings listed and evaluated in the notes. The text itself is a composite, based on the best guesses of scholars.

The situation facing Skousen, fortunately, is much simpler—for the Book of Mormon there are only two manuscripts and some 20 printed editions—and as a consequence his results are much more certain. As I mentioned above, we generally know who changed the text and when it was modified, and we have a good idea why specific variants appear. Over the course of several books, Skousen will identify and comment on a few thousand changes that have been made in the manuscripts and various editions. He will eventually develop a critical text that represents his best scholarly judgment as to exactly what Joseph Smith dictated to Oliver Cowdery and the other scribes. In doing so he will also point out passages where the current official text might be brought into closer alignment with the original dictation. This is very exciting stuff for scholars as well as for ordinary members of the Church; it is thrilling to be taken this close to the original revelation of our most distinctive Mormon scripture. But there is more.

Teaching Us to Read

So far, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon may sound like a book for scholars, and even for them it may be something to put on the shelf and consult for specific passages as the need arises. But I would urge everyone to get a copy and read it straight through. It can be tough going, but the kinds of issues Skousen raises and addresses can help English-speaking readers understand the Book of Mormon more fully than ever before. What Skousen has to offer (besides the most accurate reconstruction of the original text ever produced) is a model for careful, nuanced, detailed reading. For each of the 774 variants analyzed in part 1 of volume 4, readers are invited to pause and focus closely on exact wording, asking themselves, “What difference might this make?”

Let’s return to 1 Nephi, chapter 1, where Skousen notes these variants in verse 14:
when my father had read

and [saw 1ABCDEFGHJKLMNOPQS | seen RT] many great and marvelous things

He observes that, grammatically, there are two ways to interpret this phrase: (1) as “a conjoining of the past perfect had read and the simple past-tense saw,” or (2) “as a conjunction of ‘had read’ and ‘had saw’, with ellipsis of the repeated had.” This second reading is implicit in the change in R (1920 edition) to the past participle seen, though Skousen does identify a specific case of the non-standard usage “had saw” in the printer’s manuscript. What difference does this make? The context makes it clear that Lehi saw a vision of God on his throne and then was handed a heavenly book in which he read of the impending destruction of Jerusalem. The sequence of a past perfect tense followed by simple past suggests that after Lehi had finished reading he saw additional, unspecified events (“many great and marvelous things”) in vision, whereas a conjunction of two past perfect forms makes it sound as if the seeing and reading happened at about the same time; that is to say, the “great and marvelous things” were those that Nephi has just reported were contained in the heavenly book. If you are an average reader of the Book of Mormon (or even a way-above-average reader), I would imagine that you have never given a moment’s thought to how 1 Nephi 1:14 might be construed in different ways, unless perhaps you had translated a pre-1920 edition into a foreign language.

This is a fairly nuanced, but not atypical, example. Indeed, working through Skousen’s book is something like working through a math book—following his linguistic arguments is akin to following proofs. It takes time and attention, but when you are finished you will have a much greater understanding of the subject. In the case of the Book of Mormon, readers will become much more mindful of issues of translation, composition, and authorial intent at a higher level of detail than has ever been possible before. Sometimes the issues are relatively inconsequential—for example, whether a sentence should begin with and, if a that has been accidentally omitted, or whether the text should read in or into (though one might argue that in scripture that was dictated word for word, it is never safe to assume that anything is entirely insignificant). In other cases, the observations are subtle but insightful.

Another example of Skousen’s close analysis concerns 1 Nephi 3:16. The printer’s manuscript and all printed editions state that Lehi “left gold and silver and all manner of riches and all this he hath done because of the commandments of the Lord.” However, the original manuscript has the singular commandment. Skousen believes this is what Joseph Smith originally dictated, and he explains that “the language in 1 Nephi 3:16 implies a specific commandment for Lehi to leave his wealth behind.” This shifts our understanding of the narrative a bit because Nephi now appears to be telling his brothers that God had specifically commanded Lehi to leave behind his moveable property because God knew the brothers would need it later when they returned to Laban and tried to buy the brass plates.

In still other verses, Skousen’s reconstruction of the original dictation yields readings that are clearly superior to any that have been previously available to Latter-day Saints. The 1981 edition made several changes based on a reexamination of the original manuscript, but Skousen has studied that document more closely than anyone ever has before. For instance, in the original dictation of 1 Nephi 8:31, the multitudes are “pressing” rather than “feeling” their way toward the great and spacious building. And at 1 Nephi 15:35, the devil is the “proprietor” (original manuscript) of hell rather than its “preparator” or even its “father” or “foundation” (two later emendations made by Joseph Smith). These two suggested readings, along with several dozen others, can be found in Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon, but Analysis of Textual Variants
in the Book of Mormon has many more corrected readings, including 1 Nephi 22:8, where the Lamanites would be “nursed” (original manuscript) rather than “nourished” (printer’s manuscript and all printed editions) by the Gentiles and restored to the lands of their “first” inheritance (verse 12, though the printer’s manuscript and every edition has omitted that word). Similarly, at 2 Nephi 1:5 the original manuscript reads “the Lord hath consecrated this land unto me and to my children forever,” even though every version since then has followed Oliver Cowdery’s copying error in which he replaced consecrated with covenanted.

Skousen’s task is obviously more complicated when he is dealing with portions of the text for which the original manuscript is not extant, and he expends a great deal of effort in making the best guess possible as to the original wording. Yet even when we have the first written version of a particular passage, he is not automatically satisfied. There may have been inadvertent mistakes made when the scribes first wrote from Joseph’s original dictation. In other words, Skousen is willing to emend clear readings in the original manuscript when there seems to be sufficient cause. As an example, there are good reasons to think that the Lord promises to “shake” Nephi’s brothers at 1 Nephi 17:53 rather than “shock” them, though the latter is the clear reading of the original manuscript. Similarly, 1 Nephi 13:24 should probably read “the gospel of the Lamb” rather than “the gospel of the land” (later changed by Oliver Cowdery to “the gospel of the Lord”).

So once again we may ask, “Do these sorts of changes matter?” They certainly do if we want to understand the Book of Mormon as thoroughly and accurately as possible. In other words, we cannot afford to ignore Skousen’s critical text project. There are hidden treasures here, along with both the tools and incentive to read the Book of Mormon very, very closely. Skousen’s analysis is at the level of individual words and phrases. He is remarkably attentive to the textual evidence, and his eye and ear are finely attuned to elements that don’t quite fit. If we can follow his care and rigor, we may be led to similar kinds of scrupulous, observant readings at the next level up—that of paragraphs, thematic sections, and even chapters. This is where meaning becomes even more evident as we focus on the structure of the narrative, how ideas flow and discourses are presented, the ways in which Book of Mormon authors differ from each other, how they respond to earlier writings, the manner in which they choose to convey their points, and how they explain doctrine, their characteristic themes, and recurring concerns. In reading Skousen, we realize that we have only begun to study seriously a text that has been in our possession for 175 years. Latter-day Saints have always loved the truths the Book of Mormon teaches and the testimonies it has made possible, but there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done in investigating how this miraculous text was put together and how its authors tried to communicate their understanding of the world.

At Mormon 8:14, Moroni observes that the value of the gold plates was nothing compared to the writings they contained: “but the record thereof is of great worth; and whoso shall bring it to light, him will the Lord bless.” This undoubtedly refers primarily to Joseph Smith, but I believe it could also apply to Skousen and his critical text project. May blessings be upon Royal Skousen, who has nearly single-handedly produced the Mormon equivalent of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia and the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament—both of them truly monumental achievements in the history of Judaism and Christianity. No one has ever read the Book of Mormon (including all the manuscripts and editions) more carefully than Skousen has. Get hold of a copy of Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon and read it through, laboriously and joyfully. We can each be the beneficiaries of this tremendous work of scholarship that will outlive us all.

I suspect that I was invited to participate in reviewing and commenting on the first volume of the commentary phase of Royal Skousen’s Book of Mormon critical text project in part because I am in print as having some different views regarding Book of Mormon translation theory than Skousen does. Skousen is on record as preferring what he calls a “tight control” model of the translation, namely, that the English text of the Book of Mormon is a rather literal translation that closely follows its original language exemplar written on the gold plates. In contrast, I prefer what I call “eclecticism,” which means that I do not approach the text with a single translation model in mind but remain open as to whether a given passage reflects tighter or looser control, or even midrashic embellishment, on the part of Joseph Smith as the modern translator. Rather than approach the text with an ideological commitment to how the translation relates to the underlying text in every instance, I prefer to simply follow the evidence as I see it in each particular passage, evidence that sometimes may point in one direction and other times in another. One of the more concrete ramifications of this difference of perspective is that I see Book of Mormon Isaiah variants as tending to revolve around the italicized expressions in the text of the King James Version (KJV), whereas Skousen does not.¹

So if this were a book on underlying Book of Mormon translation theory, I would bring a different point of view to the table. But it is not. Rather, this book is a work of “lower criticism,” part of a series dedicated to establishing, to the greatest extent possible, the original English text of the Book of Mormon as it was dictated in 1829. And on that subject, I see very much eye to eye with Skousen. I hope this fundamental agreement is not a disap-
pointment to anyone, but in fact I am a great fan of the critical text project as a whole, and this commentary volume in particular. I think the project has been much needed, well conceived, and rigorously executed. My overarching reaction is to lavish all the praise I can muster for the work Skousen has done and is continuing to do on the Book of Mormon text.

The introduction (pp. 3–24) is both clear and concise. This is a particular virtue because it allows the reader to quickly and easily get into the meat of the commentary itself. I found that after reading just a few pages of the commentary, I had the methodology down and did not feel the need to constantly refer back to the introduction for an explanation of what Skousen was doing. I did, however, appreciate that the volume came with a bookmark-size card that summarizes the sigla used in the commentary; such cards have become an expected convenience to be included with critical texts that make use of numerous symbols. I especially liked how Skousen, after each description, gives a quick and concise synopsis of his reasoning and conclusion as to which reading to accept.

To be a good textual critic requires expertise in the relevant languages. Inasmuch as this project is not trying to look behind the original English text of the Book of Mormon, there is only one relevant language here, and that is English. Skousen is a professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, so he is well equipped for the task. I also thought he employed an appropriately light touch when it came to comments on possible Hebrew influence, generally as mediated through the KJV. A good example of this is in the 1 Nephi preface (pp. 49–50), where he is trying to decide between “they call the place Bountiful” and “they call the name of the place Bountiful.” As I began to read that comment, I immediately suspected that the variant “name of the” reflected a common Semitic pleonasm. But Skousen’s assistant, David Calabro, points out that both the pleonastic (as in Genesis 35:15) and nonpleonastic (as in Genesis 35:7)
constructions are attested in Hebrew as reflected in the KJV, so reliance on what appears at first blush to be a Semitic pleonasm is not a safe basis for textual reconstruction. Skousen only occasionally refers to Hebrew usage as possible evidence, and when he does so he does it conservatively, keeping the emphasis where it should properly be: on the English manuscript and versional evidence. He comments on the Hebrew more directly with respect to the Isaiah quotations in 1 Nephi 20–21 and 2 Nephi 7–8, but again, his emphasis is properly on comparing the Book of Mormon text to the English of the King James Bible. I also noted a few places where Skousen could have used the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) as a further control for his position (for instance, in the tendency to modernize the relative pronoun *which* when it had a personal antecedent by replacing it with *who* [p. 29]), but Skousen already had an ample supply of more direct evidence and did not really need the further-afield JST evidence to make his case.

Textual criticism often seems counterintuitive to one who is not experienced in it. As I read this commentary, I was pleased to see that Skousen is obviously a fine textual critic who consistently makes appropriate decisions and exercises sound judgment. Some illustrations where Skousen did the right thing, even if it might leave some readers scratching their heads, include the following:

- Skousen often has occasion to apply the principle of *lectio difficilior*, to the effect that, all other things being equal, the more difficult reading is likely to be original. On the surface this seems precisely backward, yet a little thought will reveal that it is a useful principle, for scribes who later worked on a text endeavored to smooth out problems, not create them. An illustration of this is at 1 Nephi 1:3 (pp. 54–55), where Skousen must decide between “and I know that the record which I make to be true” in the earliest textual sources and “and I
know that the record which I make is true” in the majority of textual sources. He correctly chooses the more difficult reading with the infinitive, not the less jarring reading with the indicative form of the verb. This is the kind of hard decision a textual critic must make.

- Skousen consistently shows a willingness to override Joseph Smith’s own 1837 editing. For instance, as described on page 84, Joseph attempted to edit the expression “in the which” to “in which” by removing the word the, succeeding in exactly half of the 56 occurrences of that expression. Skousen rightly returns all of these to the original “in the which.” Similarly, Joseph marked 48 examples of “it came to pass” for deletion in the 1837 edition (p. 207), and Skousen restores them. In 1837 Joseph was modifying the text as an editor, and Skousen properly returns the text to its original, unedited form.

- It may seem incongruous that Skousen restores archaisms and grammatical errors and infelicities, but that is his job as a textual critic. Scribes and editors over time endeavored to modernize and correct the text. So if Skousen wishes to go in the opposite direction toward the original text, he must trend away from the later modernizing and correcting tendencies and toward the earlier archaisms, errors, and infelicities. Skousen’s goal is to re-create the original text, not the most correct or some sort of an ideal text. So he restores an apparently plural use of thou on page 98, the ungrammatical “against 1 Nephi” on page 143, and so on. An ideal text might reflect number-verb agreement, such as “they were yet wroth,” but a critical text must restore what was no doubt the original (and ungrammatical) “they was yet wroth” in 1 Nephi 4:4 (pp. 101–5).

Much of what Skousen discusses in such detail may seem like so many trifles to the casual reader. For instance, on page 113 he begins to spend nearly four pages on distinguishing between in and into. While such a difference may be immaterial to most readers, to Book of Mormon scholars much can hang on such seemingly trifling distinctions. Skousen’s willingness to go to such lengths to establish the text testifies to the importance the Book of Mormon has achieved as a religious text.

Perhaps the most difficult—and dangerous—terrain for a textual critic to traverse is the conjectural emendation, which is a speculative attempt to solve a textual problem in the absence of hard manuscript evidence. Failure to engage in at least some conjectural emendation is a failure to take the job of textual critic seriously. But engaging in too many flights of whimsical textual fancy is even more problematic. I found that Skousen approaches necessary conjectural emendations with a very appropriate, conservative methodology. To illustrate:

- On pages 137–40, Skousen accepts Oliver Cowdery’s emendation of 1 Nephi 7:1 from “that might raise up seed unto the Lord” in the original manuscript to “that they might raise up seed unto the Lord.” The change was made with no textual basis, but Skousen carefully analyzes the evidence and concludes that something like Cowdery’s emendation was almost certainly intended.

- At 1 Nephi 7:5, the original manuscript read “and also his hole,” and the word hole was then inserted again above the line, resulting in “and also his hole hole.” When copying the printer’s manuscript, Cowdery interpreted this text as “household.” But again, based on a careful analysis, Skousen brilliantly suggests an even stronger emendation, to “whole household.”

- As important as it is to make sound conjectural emendations, it is equally important to know when to reject an emendation to the text. A good example is at the 1 Nephi preface, discussed on pages 50–52. A correspondent had suggested that, given the shift from third to first person, and for other reasons that may seem cogent on the surface, the I in “I Nephi” near the end of the preface should be interpreted as the roman numeral I (in the sense of “first”) rather than the first person singular pronoun. Skousen carefully reviews the situation and rejects this proposed emendation; surely he is correct in this.

I almost invariably agreed with Skousen’s reasoning and conclusions. There were, however, a couple of counterexamples. The first has to do with the attribution of the work at the end of the title page. He rejects the evidence from the earliest sources for “by Joseph Smith Junior author and proprietor” in favor of “translated by Joseph Smith
Junior.” I found his analysis needlessly defensive here. Everyone knows that the “author and proprietor” wording had a copyright background, as he rightly explains. That some anti-Mormons have tried to turn this into an argument that Joseph did not really translate the book is just plain silly. Skousen defends this change on the grounds that the attribution is not part of the original text of the Book of Mormon, which is true, but if he is going to comment on it anyway and make a textual judgment about it, he should still approach it from a sound text-critical perspective. In my view, the wording he prefers is clearly secondary and should not be part of the critical text. Of course, one of the virtues of Skousen’s commentary is that he fully explains the situation, so that even if one disagrees with his ultimate choice, as I do here, one has the information and analysis readily available to form one’s own judgment.

While I anticipate that, for the foreseeable future, Latter-day Saint editions will continue to be based on Orson Pratt’s versification system and Community of Christ editions will not, I would not be at all surprised to see the editions produced by the two groups come closer together in their textual readings as a result of having the solid framework of a well-established critical text that Skousen is in the process of providing.

I also had a minor quibble with his treatment of the strait versus straight issue beginning on page 174. First, I found it curious that Skousen chose not to cite previous treatments of this issue, including his own in the pages of this journal. Second, I thought he relied a little too heavily on the redundancy of “strait and narrow path” as an argument for the nonredundant “straight and narrow path.” If this were simply English literature, the redundancy of the expression would be strong evidence against it; but Hebraic literature tends by its nature to be formulaic and repetitive. Skousen notes that in Matthew 7:14, “because strait is the gate and narrow is the way,” the adjectives strait/narrow are modifying different terms, gate//way, which is true. But formularity that finds expression in a parallel collocation, such as strait/narrow does in the Matthew passage, often results in the same terms being used elsewhere in nonparallel juxtapositions as well, such as the syntetic “strait and narrow path” would be. This is a minor point because I agree with Skousen’s ultimate conclusion, but in my calculus I would weight the parallels with biblical passages deriving from the language of Isaiah 40:3 as more probative than the argument from redundancy.

As I read the commentary, it occurred to me that Skousen’s work might actually succeed in bringing LDS and RLDS (now Community of Christ) editions of the Book of Mormon closer together in the future. Historically, Book of Mormon editions have been produced by sectarian committees along separate denominational lines. But Skousen’s work takes into account prior editions from both traditions, and his lodestar is sound text-critical scholarship, with no place for sectarian bias. While I anticipate that, for the foreseeable future, Latter-day Saint editions will continue to be based on Orson Pratt’s versification system and Community of Christ editions will not, I would not be at all surprised to see the editions produced by the two groups come closer together in their textual readings as a result of having the solid framework of a well-established critical text that Skousen is in the process of providing.

Also, as I read I entertained the (possibly fanciful) notion that the tools Skousen is in the process of giving us for Book of Mormon textual criticism may actually be superior to what we have for the Bible itself. For instance, the standard critical text of the Hebrew Bible, Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, is woefully inadequate in its recitation of evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls (a new and improved edition is in the process of preparation), and Bruce M. Metzger’s A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, while a wonderful tool, is nowhere near as extensive or detailed as Skousen’s work. I finally concluded, however, that in many respects this was an unfair, apples-to-oranges comparison, given the vastly greater number of witnesses, the greater antiquity of the sources, and the different languages involved in biblical textual criticism as
compared with the textual criticism of the Book of Mormon. Still, I think Skousen’s work stacks up quite well against the biblical materials with which I am familiar.

I must confess a certain disappointment with Skousen’s decision not to produce an actual critical edition of the Book of Mormon, as he initially had contemplated in his essay “Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon” in BYU Studies. I have seen enough of the critical text project now to feel quite comfortable that all of the basic information will be made available through his chosen format in this series, and I have every intention of collecting all of the future volumes as they are issued. But I would still like to see an actual critical edition in print at the conclusion of the critical text project, preferably in a smaller format than the large volumes of the series so far, and for an inexpensive price. Such a volume could serve as a sort of summary of the conclusions Skousen has reached through the project as a whole, it would be accessible and within the buying power of students, and it would be portable (much like the critical editions produced by the United Bible Societies), something one could stick in a briefcase or read on a plane. I hope that Skousen has not completely closed the door on the possibility of issuing such an edition at the conclusion of the critical text project.

In conclusion, I was deeply impressed by this commentary. Skousen’s linguistic control of the English language and his rigor in dealing with the textual materials was nothing short of masterful. This is an ongoing, seminal work in Latter-day Saint scholarship, and a standard against which subsequent text-critical studies of Mormon scripture will be judged. The bar has been set exceedingly high. I would like to finish by expressing to Skousen and those who have worked with him on this project my heartiest congratulations for a job very, very well done. Even casual students of the Bible have long had easily accessible the tools necessary to study it closely from a text-critical perspective; it is about time that the Book of Mormon joined the Bible’s company in that regard. Skousen’s text-critical scholarship is, in my judgment, well worthy of its object, the Book of Mormon, which is high praise indeed.

Orson Pratt (1811–1881) established the versification system used in Latter-day Saint editions of the Book of Mormon. Courtesy IRI.
WHAT EXCITES ME MOST about Royal Skousen’s Analysis of Textual Variants, Part One: 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10 (hereafter Analysis) is what it says about Latter-day Saints’ commitment to the scriptures in general and to the Book of Mormon specifically. This volume, like others in the series published to date, bespeaks our desire to know, as accurately as possible, what the text actually says. We understand that even those with the best intentions sometimes introduce mistakes into the most sacred and important texts. Skousen demonstrates that he and others value the Book of Mormon so much that meticulous and intense efforts are under way to preserve the text in its most pristine state. Virtually every word is examined in an effort to preserve the words of God in the Book of Mormon in the form closest to that which flowed from the Prophet’s revelatory experience. Latter-day Saints revere the Book of Mormon as the most correct book on earth and are committed to keeping it as correct as possible so that future generations too may experience its sacred influence.

Skousen’s Analysis highlights how the Lord works with imperfect people. The need for this study derives from mistakes that have crept into the text, starting from the moment the words were transmitted from the Prophet’s mouth to a scribe’s pen. Textual transmission problems have plagued scribes from the advent of writing, and every serious sacred record has had to deal with such problems. This is part and parcel of the transmission of sacred works by imperfect humans. Mistakes, such as writing home or whome for whom (see Analysis, p. 182), demonstrate why modern-day transcribers of the Book of Mormon text must have been as concerned as were their Nephite predecessors, who complained that “when we write we behold our
weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words” (Ether 12:25; see 2 Nephi 3:21 and 33:4).

Undoubtedly the Lord—by the power and influence of his Spirit—can compensate, and has compensated, for mistakes that have crept into the text during the dictation and transcription process. I believe that although those who read even mistakenly worded sacred texts can yet understand them as the Lord would have them understood, the Lord holds us responsible for maintaining, and even restoring, the purity of the Book of Mormon text.

Skousen deftly leads the reader inside a number of almost invisible features of the Book of Mormon text, illuminating its complexity, history, and antiquity. The closer a person comes to the words that Joseph Smith dictated, it seems, the more the text reveals its own depth and richness.

**Intertextuality**

Skousen’s meticulous efforts to establish the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon make it possible to take a closer look at intertextuality in the book. By this I mean carefully looking at phrases and word orders, comparing them with similar phrases elsewhere in the book, and determining whether some uses are dependent on others. Intertextual comparisons can be performed with similar words, phraseology, semantics, imagery, poetic devices, and grammar. Intertextuality is particularly important when a work comprises a series of shorter parts created over a span of time, with the contents of the earlier portions being familiar to and used by the authors of the later portions. Intertextual studies have become important in biblical scholarship as well as in the study of other sacred texts. In recent decades, biblical studies have been greatly enhanced by an understanding of how certain scriptural themes and ideas developed throughout Israelite history as evidenced by intertextual studies.

Rarely has this type of work been applied to the Book of Mormon. Analysis provides scores of examples of intertextual studies that attest to the Book of Mormon’s cohesion and thus, circumstantially, to its authenticity. This approach also helps us understand how much Book of Mormon prophets themselves relied on the sacred scripture given to them by previous Book of Mormon prophets. But perhaps the greatest value we gain from the intertextual studies presented in Analysis is the insight each concise study gives us into the presence, unity, and meaning of themes in the Book of Mormon. For example, Skousen’s study on the theme of law and punishment (p. 510)—provided in an attempt to discover whether 2 Nephi 2:26 should read “punishment of the Law” or “punishment of the Lord”—illuminates the relationship of these paired concepts and attests to the Book of Mormon prophets’ unified understanding of them. This is just one of many examples of intertextuality in the Book of Mormon, a topic that deserves a more detailed study—something that is facilitated by Analysis—and that will undoubtedly aid us in understanding the Book of Mormon’s motifs as understood by its various prophetic authors.

One cannot read Skousen’s work without paying very close attention to each word and its relationship to surrounding words. Because Skousen has taken the text so seriously, we find ourselves responding likewise.

**Word Choices in the Text**

One benefit of carefully reading Analysis is that it compels one to pay close attention to word choices in the Book of Mormon. The Church has been told that it is under condemnation for taking this book of scripture too lightly (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:54–58). Part of this neglect likely entails the minimal attention we have given to the actual wording of the Book of Mormon. Given the sacred nature of the text, I am often surprised at how little students and others pay attention to what the text actually says as opposed to what they think it says or what they heard in some class while growing up. Yet one cannot read Skousen’s work without paying very close attention to each word and its relationship to surrounding words. Because Skousen has taken the text so seriously, we find ourselves responding likewise.

An example of how Analysis encourages our own critical reading concerns words that suggest a causal relationship. In 2 Nephi 9:28 we read
We should be careful about making too much of the nuances of an English word when it may have been the best approximation that English could offer for an original Hebrew word with very different nuances.

The Textual Transmission Process

Another reason Skousen’s findings are exciting is that they provide a well-documented window on the textual transmission process. In my work I often deal with matters of ancient textual transmission and textual variants, an area of study frequently plagued by lack of knowledge as to which texts came first and which are related to others. Ignorance of the copying procedures is another problem. Even with these obstacles, we can usually determine something about the process that resulted in variations of the same text. For the Book of Mormon, Skousen has outlined quite well the chronological order of the texts, identified various scribes and their scribal tendencies, and demonstrated which texts have been relied upon by others in the transmission process. As a result, we see that some scribes engaged in practices that were difficult for other scribes (see the pr/pe discussion below), that some mistakes in some editions were perpetuated in later editions, and that some mistakes were not perpetuated because no one relied on those editions as they created new ones. Reading Analysis with this in mind is akin to the philological equivalent of ethnoarchaeology. Skousen’s findings regarding a relatively modern-day textual transmission process help us understand a great deal about related ancient processes. As I learn, for instance, that a particular scribe’s pr combinations consistently look like pe combinations and that later scribes read them as such, I better understand the difficulties behind our receiving ancient texts in a pristine form. Being able to follow such carefully documented changes over
time in this sacred text enables me to ask new questions about how other sacred texts were transmitted. Skousen’s work proves to be an excellent case study in sacred textual history and processes.

Hebraisms

Another interesting aspect of Analysis is that it demonstrates that the Book of Mormon originally contained even more Hebraisms than those that have already been identified in the current text. Presumably because certain Semitic syntactic and semantic tendencies seemed either awkward or ungrammatical to various scribes and editors throughout the years, many such phrases and tendencies have, over time, been edited out. For example, 1 Nephi 2:7 originally read, “he built an altar of stones and he made an offering unto the Lord.” The second he was present in the original manuscript, the printer’s manuscript, the 1830 edition, and two RLDS editions, yet it was edited out of all other editions. In English this second he certainly seems redundant and superfluous. Yet in Semitic languages, including Hebrew, most verbs contain an element marking which person performed the action and thus are often translated with these extra pronouns. A similar pronoun deletion occurred in 1 Nephi 2:4 and 2:11. Restoring these pronouns makes the text read even more like the Semitic document it is. Similarly, in many cases the word and was deleted, such as in 1 Nephi 2:11, where the phrase “and to perish in the wilderness” has lost the and since the 1830 edition. The conjunction typically translated as and is ubiquitous in Hebrew. Interestingly enough, this is not the case with Egyptian, which has a very different paradigm for conjunctive use. While the text of the Book of Mormon as it now reads already contains enough non-English appearances of and to support the idea that the text was indeed originally not English or Egyptian but Hebrew, the critical text intensifies this impression.

The book’s underlying Semitic character can also be seen in the use of the phrase “speak . . . saying.” In English we very seldom write that someone “spoke, saying . . .” Yet this is exactly the way Hebrew introduces direct quotations. The Book of Mormon still retains this Hebraic tendency, although some of the examples have been edited out over time. Skousen’s restorations of the deleted saying (as in 1 Nephi 2:10) further highlight the Hebraic tendencies of the text. The closer to the original we come, the more it appears to be a genuinely Semitic document. The text’s Semitic influence can also be seen when Oliver Cowdery added the word saying to the text. Probably because he had become
so accustomed to the use of the word pair “speak . . . saying,” Oliver, when preparing the printer’s manuscript, added the word to 1 Nephi 7:1, changing it from reading “it came to pass that the Lord spake unto him again that it was not meet for him” to “it came to pass that the Lord spake unto him again saying that it was not meet for him.” This change has been perpetuated in every version of the text thereafter. While Oliver had probably become used to this word being employed more in Book of Mormon language than in English, it is clear that he did not understand the precise function of the “speak . . . saying” construction in Hebrew. As already noted, saying is used to indicate that the next phrase is a direct quotation. However, in this particular passage, a direct quotation is not being introduced. Skousen notes that there are 76 examples of “X spake . . . saying Y” in the Book of Mormon and that, when adhering to the earliest textual examples, in all 76 cases a direct quotation is introduced. This matches precisely the way the phrase was used in Hebrew. It is only in the changes made after the original translation that non-Hebrew language practices appear. Again, Skousen’s analysis strongly suggests that the original translation was much more Hebraic in its tendencies than the current, edited text is. The closer we adhere to the original text, the more Semitic the text becomes. We would be unaware of this striking detail without Skousen’s work.

These are only a few of the wonderful effects deriving from Skousen’s monumental project. Other reviewers in this issue of the Journal have highlighted different aspects of Skousen’s work, and certainly there are boons to be gained from the critical text project that none of us who have reviewed part 1 of Analysis have yet thought of. Analysis is a large step forward in the efforts of modern-day caretakers of the sacred scriptures. I look forward to a new generation of scholarship that is able to employ this valuable tool to help us come to a greater understanding of the most correct of all books.

Summary of Results for Part 1 Only

- 774 cases of variation (or potential variation) analyzed cases of grammatical variation discussed only once; full discussion to be in volume 3
- 420 differences between the critical text and the standard text
- 157 readings that have never appeared in any printed edition:
  - 95 in Œ, the original manuscript, only
  - 6 in Ò, the printer’s manuscript, only (Œ is not extant)
- 38 in both Œ and Ò
- 2 only in the two 1829 copyright certificates
- 16 conjectured readings
- 75 readings make a difference in meaning that would show up in any translation
- 52 readings make the text fully consistent in phraseology or usage
- 14 readings restore a unique phrase or word choice to the text
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incorrect Reading</th>
<th>Corrected Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 7:5</td>
<td>Ishmael and also his whole household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 7:17</td>
<td>my faith which is in me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 8:27</td>
<td>towards those which had came up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 8:31</td>
<td>multitudes pressing their way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 10:19</td>
<td>take away the sin of the world [John 1:29]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 11:36</td>
<td>the pride of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 12:18</td>
<td>the sword of the justice of the eternal God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 13:24</td>
<td>the gospel of the Lamb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 13:32</td>
<td>state of awful wickedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 14:13</td>
<td>did gather together in multitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 14:28</td>
<td>the things which I saw and heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 15:16</td>
<td>they shall be numbered again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 15:35</td>
<td>the devil is the proprietor of hell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 15:36</td>
<td>the wicked are separated from the righteous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 17:3</td>
<td>he did provide ways and means for us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 17:41</td>
<td>he sent flying fiery serpents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 17:53</td>
<td>I will shake them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 19:4</td>
<td>the genealogy of his forefathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 19:10</td>
<td>Zenoch [compare with Enoch]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 20:1</td>
<td>or out of the waters of baptism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 22:8</td>
<td>unto the being nourished by the Gentiles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 22:12</td>
<td>the lands of their first inheritance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 1:5</td>
<td>the Lord hath consecrated this land unto me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 2:11</td>
<td>neither happiness nor misery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 3:18</td>
<td>I will raise up one unto the fruit of thy loins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 3:20</td>
<td>their cry shall go forth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 4:5</td>
<td>in the right way that ye should go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 4:26</td>
<td>the Lord . . . hath visited me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 7:11</td>
<td>all ye that kindle a fire [Isaiah 50:11]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nephi 9:13</td>
<td>deliver up the bodies of the righteous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Upon further review” is a phrase we sometimes cringe to hear. It usually means that we missed the first call, that we somehow got the facts wrong in our initial pronouncement.

But correcting errors is as important a function as announcing fantastic new findings. And upon further review it looks like the report entitled “Ancient Steel Sword Unearthed,” which appeared in the “Out of the Dust” department of the last issue of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies (14/2, 2005, p. 64), was premature. In this case, all that glitters is not . . . steel.

The erroneous report featured a photograph of an ancient iron knife with a curved blade and an ornate ivory handle that had been discovered in Israel. The artifact was actually unearthed quite a long time ago, during the 1980s, by archaeologists Seymour Gitin and Trude Dothan during the excavation of Tel Miqne, the ancient Philistine city of Ekron. In the 1990s I served as a field archaeologist under Gitin and Dothan at Ekron and became familiar with the finds of the site, including the handsome curved knife. It is now on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

The author of the item in the Journal had seen the photograph of the iron knife in a retrospective article by Gitin about Ekron that appeared in the November 2005 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review (often simply called BAR). Perhaps he assumed the find was recent. The caption given to the photo by a BAR editor, referring to the knife as a “dagger,” was incorrect. This is a term the excavators never use when discussing the artifact. Both Gitin and Dothan always refer to it as a knife.

The curved knife had been discovered next to a series of bamot (cultic installations) in the remains of a large public building at Ekron dating from the 11th century BC, during Iron Age I. Dothan, the world’s foremost expert on early Philistine material culture, maintains that the knife was probably a ceremonial tool used in a Philistine religious setting.

Unfortunately, the claims made in the Journal suggesting that this iron knife was actually made of steel and that it was really a “short sword” are incorrect and unsupportable. Neither of the excavators, whom I know personally quite well, would describe the knife in this manner. And the Journal write-up seems to give the impression that the knife dates to the late 7th century BC (the time of Lehi and Nephi) by mentioning a 604 BC destruction date of the city. But
this is also in error, since the knife was found in a stratum dating 400 to 500 years earlier! The *Journal* write-up also insisted that the knife’s blade “must technically be described as steel” because the smelting process infused carbon into the iron. But *any* smelting process that uses charcoal will introduce some amount of carbon into worked iron—this does not necessarily mean the iron has become hardened into steel. Insisting on such a notion would present a problem: if all smelted iron were called “steel,” then what is left to be called “iron”? Even Nephi, who was an experienced metalworker, reported that he worked in *both* iron and steel (see 2 Nephi 5:15). Obviously, the iron that Nephi smelted did not all become steel.

In ancient Israel, the process of hardening iron into steel appears to have its origin in the 7th century BC (late in Iron Age II). This is the very period in which Lehi and Nephi lived. So Nephi’s mention of “steel” in his narrative is quite plausible in archaeological terms. And, in fact, steel artifacts from this same period have been found in Israel, most notably a steel sword that was found near Jericho during the 1980s. The Jericho sword may be considered a remarkable parallel to the steel sword of Laban mentioned by Nephi (see 1 Nephi 4:9).

But the curved iron knife in question was not produced in the 7th century BC. Rather, it was produced in the 11th, or possibly even the 12th, century BC, early in Iron Age I—centuries before the process of making steel came into play and centuries before the time of Nephi. It was not made of steel, nor was it a sword, “short” or otherwise. Upon further review, the record stands corrected.

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This ancient Judean sword, dating to about 600 BC and found near Jericho, is on display at Jerusalem’s Israel Museum. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey R. Chadwick.
The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing
Robert A. Rees


2. By “more rational” I mean that to the extent one can make a case for the existence of automatic writing (a reasonable possibility to entertain since there are so many examples of the phenomenon and such a wide variety of styles), then this theory becomes a more plausible explanation for how the Book of Mormon was produced than many other explanations that, when seriously considered, prove to be either ridiculous or without credible evidence.


4. According to the official Course in Miracles Web site (www.acim.org), through a process called “inner dictation,” A Course in Miracles was “dictated” by Jesus to Dr. Helen Schucman, a clinical and research psychologist and tenured associate professor of medical psychology at Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons, in New York City. The course of study is defined as follows: “This is a course in miracles. It … does not aim at teaching the meaning of love, for that is beyond what can be taught. It does aim, however, at removing the blocks to the awareness of love’s presence, which is your natural inheritance. The opposite of love is fear, but what is all-encompassing can have no opposite. This course can therefore be summed up very simply in this way: Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God.” “A Course in Miracles” has been translated into many languages and is used as a course of spiritual study throughout the world.

5. “The Urantia Book,” first published by the Urantia Foundation in 1955, was authored by celestial beings as a special revelation to our planet, Urantia. The book’s message is that all human beings are one family, the sons and daughters of one God, the Universal Father. It instructs on the genesis, history, and destiny of mankind and on our relationship with God. It also presents a unique and compelling portrayal of the life and teachings of Jesus, opening new vistas of time and eternity, and revealing new concepts of Man’s ever-ascending adventure of finding the Universal Father in our friendly and carefully administered universe” (Urantia Foundation, www.urantia.org). The Urantia text was a “revelation” dictated to and “transcribed” by an anonymous group living in Chicago. Like A Course in Miracles, The Urantia Book has been translated into many languages and is studied in many countries.


8. Robert Almeder, Beyond Death: Evidence for Life After Death (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1987), 60–62. Obviously, such anecdotal reports are not the same as controlled scientific studies, and yet the number of such reported incidences offers at least the possibility that some may be reliable.

9. A term coined by Gordon Thomasson in “Daddy, What’s a ‘Frontier’?: Thoughts on the ‘Information Environment’ That Supposedly Produced the Book of Mormon,” unpublished manuscript in my possession, p. 18. Thomasson provides the most detailed account yet as to what information might have been available to someone living in eastern New York in the late 1820s. According to Thomasson, “There are two types of critical tests which can be made on Book of Mormon data: [1] The first type involves subjects about which an information vacuum can be shown to have existed in 1830—and about which the Book of Mormon takes a position which can be compared to new data revealed by contemporary scholarship (textual comparison of the Book of Mormon with otherwise unparalleled Qumran and/or Nag Hammadi documents might fall in this category). [2] The second class of tests includes those in which the information environment of 1830 can be shown to have documented a particular position which the Book of Mormon took exception to—and these two conflicting ideas can be compared to current scholarly opinion. These are tests which the Book of Mormon can pass or fail—taking into consideration the open-ended dialogue which is true scholarship. These are tests to which it generally has not been subjected.”


17. I believe Dunn may be disingenuous when he states, “It may be argued that automatic writing is God’s true means of giving revelations and translations (in the case of Joseph Smith) ” (“Automaticity,” 36).

18. Givens, By the Hand of Mormon, 177–78. In an online review of Givens’s book (www.solomonsplading.com/lnb/givens2002.htm), Dale R. Broadhurst identifies automatic writing as one of the possible explanations of the Book of Mormon. “For those deciding not to join the Mormons, and thereby eliminating the explanation that the book is what it says it is, there are three remaining options for further investigation. These possibilities are: (A) Smith wrote the text almost entirely upon his own, whether by design or through a process something like automatic writing; (B) the text was produced by someone(s) other than Smith, and Smith only joined the process shortly before its publication; or, (C) the book was produced by Smith and one or more other contributors working together.”}

ENDNOTES

Robert A. Rees
specific incidents relevant to the sitter and the deceased. In Schwartz's tests, each medium had a session with the same sitter, and the experiment was repeated with several sitters. The sitters were instructed to reply to any questions from the mediums with either a yes or no, with no elaboration. All 'messages' from the deceased were carefully recorded—vividly told.... —and then later analyzed, point by point, for accuracy. Accuracy was scored on a hit-or-miss scale in the range of -3 to +3 [-3 = a complete miss, +2 = a probable miss, -1 = a possible miss, +1 = a possible hit, +3 = a definite hit].

"How well did the mediums do? The results showed that the mediums ranged from 77 to 95 percent accuracy! Their average for +3 hits was 83 percent! Similar experiments were conducted with students, who have no claim to psychic abilities, in the medium position, and they were able to achieve only 36 percent accuracy. So are the mediums just better at it, or are they experts at doing 'cold readings,' as the skeptics suggest, taking cues from the sitters' voice inflections and body language? To eliminate this possibility, Schwartz and Russek's experiments became more and more stringent, to the point where the mediums were not allowed to see or even directly hear the sitter. All answers were relayed to the medium through Schwartz. Even with the tightest controls, the mediums' accuracy was above 90 percent" (http://paranormal.about.com/library/weekly/a9930902b.htm).

28. Rollin McCratty, Mike Atkinson, and Raymond Trevor Bradley, "Electrophysiological Evidence of Intuition: Part 2. A System-Wide Process?" The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine 10/2 (2004): 334. In another study, HeartiMath researchers conclude, "Even more surprising was our finding that this heart appears to receive this "intuitive" information before the brain. This suggests that the heart's field may be linked to a more subtle energetic field that contains information on objects and events remote in space or ahead in time. Called by Karl Pribram and others the 'sensory domain,' this is a fundamental order of potential energy that enfolds space and time, and is thought to be the basis for our consciousness of the whole" (Rollin McCratty, Raymond Trevor Bradley, and Dana Tomasoana, "The Resonant Heart," Shift: At the Frontiers of Consciousness 5 [Dec. 2004–Feb. 2005], 15–19).
32. Dan Vogel attempts to discredit these witnesses and to undermine their testimonies of the existence of the plates by seeing their experiences as hallucination, hypnotism, or "induced visionary experiences" ("The Validity of the Witnesses," in American Apocrypha, 79–121). Vogel's piece is so shot through with subjunctive qualifiers (if, probably, perhaps, seems, might, assuming that, likely, probable, possibility, etc.) that it is difficult to take his argument seriously.
41. Nibley, Since Cumora, 194.
42. Givens, By the Hand of Mormon, 120.
44. See Givens, By the Hand of Mormon, 156.
46. Schwartz, Afterlife, xxiii.
49. As Gordon Thomasson states, "Upon finding a possible parallel between the Book of Mormon and some bit of early American history, it is all too often assumed that the source for the idea has been found and further study is neglected or even ridiculed. Such an at best naive, reductionist approach ignores the fact that where parallels occur they almost invariably relate to what are perennial questions—themes which recur in countless religious histories—and which are by no means unique to the Burned-over District in space or time, and/or may correlate even more significantly with ancient evidence than it does with the more recent" ("Frontier," 9).
Bushman states: "The Book of Mormon was an anomaly on the political scene of 1830. Instead of heroically resisting despots, the people of God fled their oppressors and credited God alone with deliverance. Instead of enlightened people overthrowing their kings in defense of their natural rights, the common people repeatedly raised up kings, and the prophets and the kings themselves had to persuade the people of the inexpediency of
monarchy. Despite Mosiah’s reforms, Nephite government persisted in monarchical prac-
tices, with life tenure for the chief judges, hereditary suc-
cession, and the combination of all functions in one official” (57).

51. Givens, By the Hand of Mor-
mon, 169.

Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records
Steven L. Olsen

1. In this paper the terms small plates and large plates initially appear in quotation marks to identify usage among Latter-
day Saints today. This short-hand distinction between the verbatim account of the proph-
ests, beginning with Nephi, and the bulk of Mormon’s abridg-
ment does not exist in the Book of Mormon, which refers to both accounts as the “plates of Nephi.”

2. See, for example, Ezra 7:28–
9:15; Nehemiah 1–13; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 1–2.

3. Most frequently, direct editorial comment in the Hebrew Bible orients readers con-
temporary with the narrator to cultural or geographical references in the text. See, for example, Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 113n2, 123n50, 182n33, 270n34, 273n11.

4. Two studies that inventory several explicit editorial state-
ments in the Book of Mor-

5. Prior studies of the edito-
rial role of Book of Mormon authors include S. Kent Brown, “Nephi’s Use of Lehi’s Record,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, 3–14; Grant R. Hardy, “Mormon as Editor,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, 15–28; and John S. Tanner, “Jacob and His Descendants as Authors,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, 52–66. Grant R. Hardy’s The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) is a fuller treatment of this theme.

6. The identity of biblical narrators has captured the attention of several biblical scholars, whose conclusions are based on inferences from the narrar-
tive itself more than on explicit breaks in the narrative’s third-
person omniscient point of view. See Merit Sternerberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading (Bloom-
ington: University of Indiana Press, 1985), 58–83, for a cri-
tique of the efforts to ascribe authorship to narrative books of the Old Testament.


8. Among the earliest and best-
known studies of the explicit crafting of the Book of Mor-

9. Relevant structural studies of sacred texts include Claude Levi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in his Structural Anthropology (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 206–31; Edmund Leach, Genesis as Myth and Other Essays (Lon-

10. See the similar direction of the Lord to Nephi in 1 Nephi 14:28 and to Moroni in Ether 13:13.

11. As a matter of convenience, I refer to Lehi’s dream-vision as a dream and to Nephi’s vision as a vision. In so doing, I do not mean to diminish the sig-
nificance of Lehi’s experience, since dreams in ancient times were considered viable means of divine communication.

12. Earlier examinations of the complementary nature of Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision are Courtney J. Lasser-
ter, “Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision: A Look at Structure and Theme in the Book of Mormon,” Perspectives: A Jour-

13. On the interpretive value of repetition in the Hebrew Bible, see Alter’s Five Books of Moses, 349n21, and Art of Biblical Narrative, 88–113; and Sternerberg’s Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 365–440.

14. Among the prophecies included in both the small plates and Mormon’s abridg-
ment are the following (this list includes selected citations of prophecies, the first citation of which comes from the small plates, followed by those, as appropriate, from Mormon’s abridgment): the destruction of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:4, 13, 18; 2 Nephi 1:4; Alma 9:9; Helaman 8:20–21); finding and settling the promised land (1 Nephi 2:20; 18:23); the curse upon the Lamanites (1 Nephi 2:22; 2 Nephi 5:21; Alma 17:15); the Nephites as rulers in the promised land (1 Nephi 2:22; 2 Nephi 5:19); the mortal ministry, atonement, and res-
urrection of Christ (1 Nephi 11; Mosiah 3–4; 14–15; Alma 7; 34; Helaman 14); the resurrection of all mankind (2 Nephi 9–10; Alma 11; 40–41; Hela-
man 14); the “wars and conten-
tions” of the Nephites (1 Nephi 12:1–5; 2 Nephi 26; Enos 1:24; Omni 1:3; Alma 50:1); the ministry of the resurrected Christ among the Nephites (1 Nephi 12:5–10; 2 Nephi 26:1; Enos 1:8; 3 Nephi 11); the four generations of righteousness (1 Nephi 12:11–12; 2 Nephi 26:9; 3 Nephi 27:31–32); the annihilation of the Nephites (1 Nephi 12:13–17; Alma 1:12; Alma 45:1–14; Helaman 15:17); the abject baseness of the surviving Lamanites (1 Nephi 12:20–23; 15:13; 2 Nephi 26:15; Helaman 31:2; Mormon 5:15); the conditions of posa-
tasy among the Gentiles in the latter days (1 Nephi 13; 2 Nephi 26; 3 Nephi 16:9–11; 21:30–21; 30:1–2; Ether 12); the migration of the Gentiles to the promised land (1 Nephi 13:12–20; 21:5–7; Mormon 5); the conversion of the house of Israel and the Gentiles in the last days (1 Nephi 14; 2 Nephi 25:17–18; 3 Nephi 15:22–20); the gathering of Israel and establishment of Zion in the last days (1 Nephi 13:37; 15:19; Mosiah 12:21–22; 3 Nephi 16:20–21; 29); the judgment of all mankind (1 Nephi 22:21; Mosiah 27:31; Alma 12:27); and the second coming of Christ and founding of the millennial kingdom of God (1 Nephi 22:26; 2 Nephi 12:13; 13; 30:18; 3 Nephi 24–25; Ether 13).

15. The following prophecies are initially uttered and fulfilled within Mormon’s historical narrative (the first citation is the prophecy and the second is its fulfillment); Abinadi foretells the tragedy to befal1.

16. Whether Mormon included a comparably editorial aside at
the beginning of his abridgment of Nephi’s large plates is not known since the initial portion of his narrative was among the 116 pages of translation lost when Martin Harris borrowed the manuscript from Joseph Smith to convince his wife of its authenticity. On the loss of the manuscript, see Richard L. Bushman, Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 66–69.

Recovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: An Interim Review

Introduction

M. Gerald Bradford

1. About 28 percent of the original manuscript (dictated by Joseph Smith) is extant. The printer’s manuscript (copied by Oliver Cowdery and two other scribes) is nearly fully extant (missing are about three lines of text at 1 Nephi 1:7–8, 20).


The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

Terry L. Givens


5. Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon, 18.


7. Skousen’s running dialogue in this volume with David Calabro, another close reader, is a pleasure to overhear.

8. I am a great fan of Hugh Nibley—he is often provocative and always entertaining—but Skousen’s precision and rigor put him to shame. See, for example, Skousen’s discussion of Nibley’s explanation of the phrase “or out of the waters of baptism” at 1 Nephi 20:1.

9. A similar project, dealing with more modern materials, is the Joseph Smith Papers, a scholarly edition of documents associated with the Prophet that will be published jointly by Brigham Young University and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 26 volumes over the next decade.

10. Similarly, outside of translators, how many Latter-day Saints have read 2 Nephi 3:18 carefully enough to notice that there is a direct object missing: “I will raise up unto the fruit of thy loins [something or someone]?” Skousen not only notices this, but he devotes six pages to resolving the difficulty created by the grammatical lapse.


 Seeking Joseph Smith’s Voice

Kevin L. Barney


2. Skousen shows his age by using the letters DHC (p. 14) as an abbreviation for what used to be called the Documentary History of the Church. The contemporary practice is to use the abbreviation HC for History of the Church.


Insights Available as We Approach the Original Text
Kerry Muhlestein
2. See John A. Tvedtnes, The Most Correct Book (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 23–24.
The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

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Reconstructing the Trek of Lehi and Sariah

Weather Report from the Valley of Lemuel

Birds along the Lehi Trail

The Slaying of Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty

In the Press: Early Newspaper Reports on the Initial Publication of the Book of Mormon