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

M. Gerald Bradford


1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Bradford introduces reviews of Royal Skousen’s work on the critical text project.
Recovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: An Interim Review

INTRODUCTION

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In 2001 Royal Skousen published carefully prepared typographical facsimiles of the original and printer’s manuscripts of the Book of Mormon¹ and thereby launched a long-term study of the text.² 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.³

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.⁴
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.

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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, Analysis of Textual Variants, Part One, 3.


Joseph Smith and the Text of the Book of Mormon

Robert J. Matthews

1. See the Wentworth Letter, in History of the Church, 4:537; Doctrine and Covenants 1:29; and “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” in the forepart of the Book of Mormon.

2. See History of the Church, 1:220.


4. Minutes of the School of the Prophets, Salt Lake City, 14 January 1871, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Scholarship for the Ages

Grant Hardy


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.


