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Abstract Royal Skousen's most significant contribution to Book of Mormon scholarship, this paper states, is in openly and systematically detailing the thousands of variants that occur across two manuscripts and twenty editions and showing that these variations do not affect the message or validity of the book as a witness of Jesus Christ. Skousen's work also offers new insights into the process of translating and publishing the Book of Mormon. Though the work of translation appears to have involved a number of different methods, we can nevertheless be sure that the Book of Mormon was translated by the "gift and power of God."



Joseph Smith and the Text of the Book of Mormon



1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Photo courtesy of Mark Philbrick.

— Robert J. Matthews —

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 (homoiooteuton). Furthermore, various kinds of errors tend to increase when the copyist 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



God¹ 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.² 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).

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.

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).



Artist's reconstruction of the Urim and Thummim (attached to the breastplate) and other Book of Mormon relics. Photo courtesy of craftsman David Baird.



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.”³

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.”⁴ 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. 

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).
2. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001); *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).
3. Recent studies of the Book of Moses began with work on the Joseph Smith Translation. See *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, edited by Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews and published by BYU's Religious Studies Center in 2004. Jackson subsequently prepared a critical edition of the Book of Moses entitled *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts*, published by BYU's Religious Studies Center in 2005. A comparable study of the Book of Abraham is under way, known as *A Textual Study of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions*, edited by Brian M. Hauglid. It will result in a comprehensive study of the four sets of Abraham manuscripts, a detailed historical comparison of the extant Book of Abraham text with all available manuscripts and editions, an analysis of significant variants in the text

over time, and an analysis of the Egyptian characters in the Book of Abraham. The work will be published in the FARMS series Studies in the Book of Abraham.

4. One can already see the impact of Skousen's efforts in J. Christopher Conkling's recent article "Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites," *JBMS* 14/1 (2005): 108–17.

The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

Terryl L. Givens

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry" (first published in 1840).
2. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art, and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 23.
3. Quoted in David J. Voelker, "The Apologetics of Theodore Parker and Horace Bushnell: New Evidences for Christianity," http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/95/hhr95_4.html.
4. M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts, eds., *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 5.
5. *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, 18.
6. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 3.
7. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part One*, 3.
8. *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, 18.
9. *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, 19.
10. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946), 1:252.

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.

3. Cited in J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Why the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1956), xxxiv.
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

1. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 415–16.
2. Skousen's running dialogue in this volume with David Calabro, another close reader, is a pleasure to overhear.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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?] and I will make for him a spokesman"? Skousen not only notices this, but he devotes six pages to resolving the difficulty created by the grammatical lapse.
6. M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts, eds., *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

Seeking Joseph Smith's Voice

Kevin L. Barney

1. This difference in perspective can be seen by comparing on the one hand Royal Skousen, "Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the

Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 381–82, with David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 159–69. Skousen alludes to this issue on page 426 of *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004) but reserves full discussion for volume 3.

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*.
3. Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, "Was the Path Nephi Saw 'Strait and Narrow' or 'Straight and Narrow'?" *JBMS* 10/2 (2001): 30–33; and John W. Welch and Daniel McKinlay, "Getting Things Straight," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 260–62.
4. See James Muilenburg, "A Study in Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 1 (1953): 99.
5. See William R. Watters, *Formula Criticism and the Poetry of the Old Testament* (New York: de Gruyter, 1976); and Kevin L. Barney, "Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon," *JBMS* 4/2 (1995): 15–81. In the terminology of James T. Duke, "strait + narrow" would be a "synonymous conjoined pair" (James T. Duke, "Word Pairs and Distinctive Combinations in the Book of Mormon," *JBMS* 12/2 [2003]: 32–41).
6. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977).
7. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: United Bible Societies, 1975).
8. Royal Skousen, "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of