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Restoring the Original Text of the Book of Mormon

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Restoring the Original Text of the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: *The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, under the editorship of Royal Skousen, began in 1988 and is now nearing completion. In 2001, facsimile transcripts of the two Book of Mormon manuscripts (volumes 1 and 2 of the critical text) were published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). From 2004 to 2009 the six books of volume 4 of the critical text,* Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, *were published, also by FARMS. Parts 1 and 2 of volume 3 of the critical text,* The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon, *will be published in early 2015. These two parts will describe all the grammatical editing that the Book of Mormon text has undergone, from 1829 up to the present. When all six parts of volume 3 of the critical text have been published, volume 5 of the critical text,* A Complete Electronic Collation of the Book of Mormon, *will be released. Within the next couple years, the Joseph Smith Papers will publish photographs of the two Book of Mormon manuscripts, along with transcriptions based on volumes 1 and 2 of the critical text. Nearly all of the work of the project has involved the knowledge and periodic involvement of the Scriptures Committee of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The project itself, however, remains independent of the Church, and none of its findings have involved any ecclesiastical approval or endorsement.*

In this paper I provide a history of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, beginning 27 years ago and nearing completion. My goal here is to identify the major results and achievements of this project.

In the mid-1980s, the first critical text of the Book of Mormon appeared. Under the editorship of Robert (Bob) Smith, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) produced the first critical text. But this critical text was preliminary in most respects.

In March 1988, at the Deseret Language and Linguistic Society (DLLS) annual meeting at Brigham Young University (BYU), I organized a symposium on the FARMS critical text. Participants were John (Jack) Welch, Lyle Fletcher, and myself. In my presentation, I proposed to do a second critical text, one that would rely on clear photographs of the manuscripts and a computerized collation of the manuscripts and editions.

The first goal of this new project was to get access to the basic textual sources. In May 1988, two months after the DLLS meeting, I met with Jack Welch, John Sorenson, and Noel Reynolds — the executive committee of FARMS at the time — and they agreed to support me in doing a second critical text. Jack agreed to see about arranging with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS Church) to get the best possible photographs for studying the original manuscript. A few days later, I received on loan from the LDS Church Historical Department a set of black-and-white ultraviolet photographs of the original manuscript. Most of these photographs had been taken around 1950. Getting permanent access to these photographs ended up as the crucial step in establishing the independence of this project. During the summer I began using the photos to make a transcript of the original manuscript. At the same time, I arranged for paid research assistants to make a second, independent transcript of the manuscript.

During that same summer, I also began selecting the editions of the Book of Mormon for which electronic versions would be produced. Larry Draper, then the librarian at the LDS Church Historical Department, played an instrumental role in gaining access to most of the editions. Under the direction of Mel Smith at the Humanities Research Center at BYU, about 15 editions were scanned. One was electronically keyed in. The rest were early 1900 editions that were visually examined for differences. In all, 21 editions have been put into electronic format. Fifteen are LDS editions, from the first edition in 1830 to the current LDS edition, dating from 1981. (The newly released 2013 edition is a minor variant of the 1981 edition and will not be collated.) Five editions are RLDS editions (from the first RLDS edition in 1874 to a modern-English edition published in 1966). And finally, there is the privately published James Wright edition, printed in 1858 in New York City. All these electronic versions have been proofed at least twice.

Later, in the fall of 1988, Jack Welch arranged for the RLDS Church Archives to loan the project a large photographic reproduction of the printer's manuscript. (The RLDS Church — the Reorganized Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints — has now been renamed the Community of Christ.) An independent transcript of this manuscript was also made by paid research assistants.

The transcripts of both the original and printer's manuscripts were keyed in directly, working strictly from the photographs themselves. I specifically decided that the transcripts would never be produced by correcting an already keyed-in electronic version of some other early text, such as the 1830 edition or the printer's manuscript (electronic versions for both of these already existed but were unreliable). Later, the two transcripts of each manuscript were checked against each other and differences reconciled. Since then, the transcripts have been checked several times by myself and other paid research assistants.

The next step was getting access to the actual manuscripts, including newly-discovered fragments of the original manuscript. In the fall of 1990, after completing the initial transcript for the printer's manuscript, I realized that I needed to examine the actual document and compare my transcript against the printer's manuscript itself. Ron Romig, archivist for the RLDS Church, prepared the way by arranging for the manuscript to be brought from the Kansas City bank vault that it was being stored in. Our visit to Independence, Missouri, was scheduled for April 1991. Ron and my wife Sirkku did the physical examination of the manuscript, while I checked the transcript. Seeing the actual manuscript made a huge difference. Photographs do not always tell the truth, especially black-and-white ones. Originally, we had planned a week-long visit, but I soon realized that the work would take longer, so we ended up spending two weeks in Independence. Even that was barely adequate.

Later that summer, I made several visits to the Wilford Wood Museum in Bountiful, Utah. Bob Smith, in the first critical edition, had noted that the museum had some "unknown very small fragments" of the original manuscript. After viewing the fragments, a lump of unreadable pieces of paper wrapped in cellophane, I enlisted the help of Robert Espinosa (then head of conservation at BYU's Harold B. Lee Library) and David Hawkinson (then the photographer for the Museum of Art at BYU), and we arranged with the Wilford Wood family to conserve and photograph the fragments at the Harold B. Lee Library.

On September 30, 1991, we began a three-week period of intense work on the fragments. Robert Espinosa, with the help of his two assistant conservators, Catherine Bell and Pamela Barrios, separated the fragments. After being humidified, unfolded, and flattened, the fragments were photographed by David Hawkinson. Black-and-white

ultraviolet photography proved the most successful in bringing out the faded ink on the fragments. Robert also identified the paper type for each fragment, except for the very smallest ones. Finally, the fragments were encapsulated in Mylar and returned to the Wilford Wood family. These fragments are from six different places in the original manuscript. They come from 29 leaves (or 58 pages) of the manuscript and account for two percent of the text.

Later that year Brent Ashworth brought in his fragment from Alma 60 to be conserved and photographed at the Harold B. Lee Library. At that time we also examined three different forgeries of fragments of the original manuscript that Brent had acquired from Mark Hofmann.

By 1992 I realized that what I needed was a set of color photographs of the printer's manuscript, so I arranged for a second visit to Independence in October 1992. My brother Nevin Skousen (a professional photographer, now deceased) photographed the entire manuscript at the RLDS Library. Later that month, with the assistance of Ron Romig, two sets of prints were made in Orem, Utah, one of which was loaned to the critical text project.

Two years later, I arranged for a one-week visit to Independence so that Robert Espinosa could make a detailed comparison of the paper types of both manuscripts. The LDS Church and the Wilford Wood family provided samples of small fragments from the original manuscript so that an on-site comparison could be made.

And one year later, in 1995, the Ada Cheney fragments of the original manuscript were conserved and photographed at the Harold B. Lee Library. These fragments come from two leaves in Alma 58–60. Several years later, one additional fragment in this group was photographed.

Also during this whole period, from 1993 to 1997, I was comparing the initial transcript of the original manuscript against the actual intact sheets of the original manuscript, as well as many fragments, at the LDS Church Historical Department in Salt Lake City. There were also numerous attempts to rephotograph some parts of the manuscript, but this proved largely unsuccessful. Later, with the help of Gene Ware of the School of Technology at BYU, selected parts of the original manuscript were examined using multispectral imaging. In 1998, Gene was also able to do multispectral imaging for selected parts of the printer's manuscript. This additional examination of the printer's manuscript occurred at the Church Historical Department, where the manuscript was being conserved for the Community of Christ.

Throughout this period, I spent considerable time hunting for additional fragments of the original manuscript, especially the Joseph Summerhays fragment, a half leaf from 1 Nephi 14–15. I also made a visit to Florida to check out the provenance of the Ruth Smith fragment (from 2 Nephi 4–5), now held by the LDS Church. And more time was spent identifying Mark Hofmann's numerous forgeries of fragments purporting to be from the original manuscript. One striking contrast was observed when the University of Chicago acquisition (discovered — and apparently produced — in the early 1980s) was examined and compared with the Wilford Wood fragments. Surprisingly, the two leaves supposedly from Alma 3–5 showed several dozen unique properties, ones that I had not seen anywhere else in either of the two Book of Mormon manuscripts, whereas the legitimate Wilford Wood fragments from 58 pages of the original manuscript showed only one property that I hadn't seen before.

Over a four-year period, from 1995 to 1999, I prepared a computerized collation for the entire text of the Book of Mormon. This lined-up comparison lists every variant for the two manuscripts and twenty editions of the Book of Mormon, from the 1830 edition to the current LDS and Community of Christ editions of the book. Not only are textual changes noted, but also every change in punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and versification. During this same period of time, I prepared a preliminary analysis of the changes in the text. This document — 3,650 pages long — discusses the evidence for about 1,500 proposed changes in the current text. This document was produced at the instigation of the LDS Church's Scriptures Committee.

In 1994, the LDS Church requested that I, as editor of the critical text project, take a leave from my teaching responsibilities at BYU and work full time on this project. Such a leave would allow me to get the project done sooner and would also allow me to share my findings with the Church Scriptures Committee.

In 1995, I signed an agreement with the LDS Church and BYU that, as editor of the project, I would convey information to the Church Scriptures Committee about possible changes to the text. The agreement specifically provided that the Church and BYU would guarantee the independence of the project — that as editor, I would (1) hold the copyright to the critical text and (2) exercise complete control over the content of the critical text. Over the next four years, as my first analysis of the textual variants was written, I conveyed this information to the Church Scriptures Committee.

Late in 1998, I made a publishing agreement with FARMS, prior to it becoming a part of BYU. In this legal document, I agreed to share the copyright with FARMS. Correspondingly, FARMS agreed to allow the editor full control over the content of the critical text volumes as well as its typesetting. The last provision was to guarantee that the design and typesetting would be done by an expert, Jonathan Saltzman.

From August 2000 through the spring of 2001, there were additional negotiations between the LDS Church, BYU, FARMS, and myself in order to resolve complications that had arisen because FARMS had become a part of BYU. In April of 2001, an amendment to the previous agreements was made, in which I acknowledged that FARMS had become a part of BYU, but that the copyright would continue to be explicitly shared between me and FARMS. Further, it was agreed that, as editor, I would continue to exercise full editorial control, including control over the typesetting.

Finally, in May 2001, the transcripts of the two manuscripts were officially published in two volumes, one for each manuscript:

> Volume 1. *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text*
>
> Volume 2. *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts*

A typographical facsimile presents an exact reproduction of the text in typescript. The text is transcribed line for line and without any corrections or expansions. Original spellings and miswritings are retained. All scribal changes in the manuscripts — whether crossouts, erasures, overwriting, or insertions — are reproduced. A continuously running text for the extant portions of the original manuscript is provided, with conjectured text placed sublinearly.

These two volumes present the earliest textual sources for the Book of Mormon. All known fragments of the original manuscript have been identified, interpreted, and pieced together (to the extent possible). With the publication of these two volumes, all the legitimate manuscript sources for the Book of Mormon text were now accessible. Using the first three editions of the Book of Mormon, along with these transcripts, scholars now had all the available information needed for studying the text of the Book of Mormon, although not yet in a convenient format.

The critical text is intended for scholars of all faiths and persuasions: LDS, Community of Christ, and all others interested in the text. Both

LDS and RLDS versifications have been provided in the identification of manuscript pages and photographs. The critical text project is a scholarly one and has not involved any ecclesiastical approval or endorsement. The transcripts and the textual interpretations represent the editor's own scholarly work, but have involved peer review from other scholars.

The design and typesetting is the work of typographer Jonathan Saltzman and presents the text in an appealing form — one appropriate to the importance of the Book of Mormon.

The next stage in the critical text project was publishing volume 4 of the critical text, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*. There are six parts (or books) in volume 4; each book is about 675 pages long and was published one at a time, one year apart, from 2004 to 2009. In these books, I analyze 5,280 cases of variation (or potential variation) in the text. Volume 4 starts out with the title page of the Book of Mormon and the two witness statements, then turns to 1 Nephi and continues through the Book of Mormon to the end of Moroni. But volume 4 excludes most cases of grammatical variation since there are simply too many of them for individual treatment. Instead, they will be fully listed in volume 3 of the critical text, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*. This third volume will discuss the transmission of the text, from the manuscripts through the major editions. I have completed about 1,300 typeset pages on the grammatical changes in the text, and am currently working on the manuscript spellings and the meanings of the original words in the text, many of which date from the 1500s and 1600s (and are not found in the King James Bible). Parts 1 and 2 of volume 3, dealing with the grammatical changes, are slated to be published early in 2015.

After volume 3 has been completely published, I will issue volume 5, *A Complete Electronic Collation of the Book of Mormon.* The electronic collation will be a lined-up comparison of the important textual sources and will specify every textual variant in the history of the Book of Mormon text. As noted earlier, the collation will include the readings of the two manuscripts and twenty editions of the Book of Mormon.

Besides its independence, another important aspect of the critical text project is that it has been public. In 2001, I invited general readers of the Book of Mormon to send me any suggestions they might have for emendation of the text. Their resulting suggestions have played a significant role in helping me to determine the original text of the Book of Mormon. In all, 42 individuals have sent me 178 suggestions or questions about various readings. I ended up accepting 37 of their suggested

emendations — about 21 percent of them. And eight of these readers went through the entire text, in a labor of love for this text, looking for alternative readings. And whenever I got a suggestion or a question about a passage, I made my own analysis and then sent back my answer, in order to provide feedback and to encourage my reader, even if the evidence was against making a particular change, to continue sending in changes. And when I wrote up these analyses in volume 4 of the critical text, I always made sure that I gave explicit credit — by name — to these individuals. It should also be noted that none of these eight readers were professors of religion, but instead they were all intelligent "lay readers" that paid attention to the text.

In 2008, I realized that when the sixth or last part of volume 4 appeared (one year later), anyone could take the results of the critical text project and publish their own "original text" of the Book of Mormon. In order to preempt such an attempt, I took steps to publish the "original text" with a major academic press. The result is the Yale edition, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, which appeared in 2009, the same time that the last part of volume 4 was being published. I decided to refer to this version as "the earliest text" since one can't be sure that it actually is "the original text", although that is the goal of this publication, to reproduce the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon to the extent that it can be determined by scholarly means. If one removes the dust jacket from the Yale edition, one notes that its hard cover is identical to the six books of volume 4. The Yale edition reproduces the text as determined in *Analysis of Textual Variants*.

There are two major innovations in the Yale edition. The first is its textual accuracy. In this edition, there are 606 readings that have never appeared in any standard printed edition. Most of these new readings, 493 of them, come from manuscript sources. There are also 113 new conjectural emendations in the Yale edition. Some might be surprised by this number. Yet overall the Yale edition has only 354 conjectured readings while the current LDS text has 654. Even then, 187 of the conjectural emendations are in both editions, so there is considerable agreement as well.

But the real textual question is: How many of these new readings make a difference in meaning? How many of these differences would show up, say, in translations of the Book of Mormon into other languages? The answer is 241. In addition, there are changes for 15 Book of Mormon names. For a sample of 30 significant changes in the text, I would recommend an article I published in the December 2012 issue of

BYU Studies, entitled "Some Textual Changes for a Scholarly Study of the Book of Mormon" (number 4 of volume 51, pages 99–117).

Another important aspect of the public nature of the critical text project is that I have insisted on making all the results publicly available, not only to the LDS Church but also to other churches (such as the Community of Christ) and, most importantly, to any interested reader. And in 2013, I was able to arrange with Yale University Press to put out an electronic PDF version of *The Earliest Text*. The electronic text is prepared for the Kindle, available through Amazon; and it works on larger electronic devices, including laptops and desktop computers.

With the electronic publication in early 2013 of a new LDS Book of Mormon (and a printed version in August of that year), the question has arisen: Where can you read the corrected text of the Book of Mormon? Not in that edition! The issue has come to the fore because the LDS Church decided for its 2013 edition not to adopt any significant changes from the critical text project. For the moment, it was as if there had never been a critical text project of the Book of Mormon!

To be sure, you will be able to find these corrections in various archives — "securely stored" — including the special collections of the BYU Library. Or you can find them in the six books of volume 4 of the critical text, along with the evidence that the original text read that way. Or online you can find a variety of lists that people are now constructing, although some of these lists rely on manuscript readings without any textual analysis. And you can write these individual changes into your own personal scriptures, with the hope that someday the correct readings will be published in an official version. Or you can read them right now in the *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (published by Yale University Press). And you can read the words out loud, much like Joseph Smith did to his scribes over 180 years ago. This has been the major goal of the critical text project, to restore the original text to the extent possible and to make it publicly available.

The other major innovation in the Yale edition is that the text is presented in a new format, one that allows for "easier reading and better comprehension", namely, sense-lines in which the lines of text are broken up according to phrases and clauses. Although it may look like poetry, it is not. Instead, its purpose is to replicate in a general way how Joseph Smith would have originally dictated the text to his scribes in phrases and clauses. More specifically, the ends of lines are used to help the reader negotiate a text that is oftentimes very difficult to comprehend,

especially when its words are hyphenated and its phrases broken up into two narrow columns.

In the fall of 2014, I made a significant step in providing public access to the results of the critical text project. I arranged with the *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* to provide online a precise read-only PDF reproduction of volume 4 of the critical text, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (ATV), published in 2004–2009 by FARMS. The 2009 Yale edition, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text,* follows the decisions made in ATV. However, the Yale text itself stands alone, without any notes, editorial summaries, commentary, or cross-referencing. In an appendix to *The Earliest Text,* I provide a list of 719 important textual changes in the history of the Book of Mormon, including a number of conjectural emendations. But there is no discussion there, just a long list of textual variants, including these three well-known examples that have engendered a lot of discussion:

1 Nephi 11:18
► the virgin which thou seest is the mother of God (𝔒, 𝔓*, 1830)
the virgin which thou seest is the mother **of the Son** of God (𝔓js, 1837)

2 Nephi 30:6
► save they shall be a **white** and a delightsome people (𝔓, 1830, 1908R)
save they shall be a **pure** and a delightsome people (1840, 1981)

Jacob 6:13
until I shall meet you before the **pleasing** bar of God (𝔓, 1830)
► until I shall meet you before the **pleading** bar of God (conjecture)

Here 𝔒 stands for the original manuscript, and 𝔓 for the printer's manuscript. The pointing symbol ► indicates which reading was selected for the Yale edition, but there is no discussion in *The Earliest Text* of why that reading was chosen. For that discussion, for the arguments why I chose these particular readings, one must look at ATV.

And that had been the difficulty. The six published books of ATV are, it is true, available directly from Amazon, BYU Bookstore, Deseret Book, and other booksellers in the Utah area. They are found in some university libraries, mostly in Utah. They are large books, and when bought as a whole set, cost about $300 (although at $50 a book, each one of the books is remarkably inexpensive for a hardbound academic book). All in all, the physical books are indispensable for serious scholars of the text who will want all this information accessible in printed, bound form.

In addition, recent discussion regarding Stanford Carmack's 2014 groundbreaking article in *Interpreter,* "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar" (volume 11, pages 209–262) made it very clear of the need to make all the information in ATV immediately available, thus allowing all interested readers to readily find out what the arguments are for various changes in the text.

So as the copyright holder for the Book of Mormon Critical Text, I therefore decided in the fall of 2014 to provide volume 4 online with the Interpreter Foundation, in accord with my 1998 legal agreement with FARMS. This read-only version of volume 4 is provided free of charge so all readers can easily find out what I have written on all the important textual changes in the Book of Mormon. It is available to all: from the casual reader to the scholar, from the skeptic to the believer; for members of the LDS Church, the Community of Christ, and all other restoration churches; for Christians and non-Christians alike; for believers and non-believers.

And the final stage in the critical text project will be the publication of photographs of the original and printer's manuscripts as part of the Joseph Smith Papers. In 2012 I signed an agreement with that project to publish a revised version of my transcripts of the manuscripts along with photographs of the Book of Mormon manuscripts. Robin Jensen is working with me as a co-editor to produce these volumes. So in the end, all researchers will have access to the photographs as well as to the transcripts of the manuscripts. You will be able to check my work! It is all part of making public the results of the Book of Mormon critical text project. The Book of Mormon is for all the world — and so is its text.

Royal Skousen is *professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University. He has been the editor of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project since 1988. Volumes 1, 2, and 4 of the critical text are published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. In 2009, Yale University Press published the culmination of Skousen's critical text work,* The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text. *An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 13th Annual Mormon Studies Conference, "The Expanded Canon: Perspective on Mormonism and Sacred Texts", 4 April 2013, Utah Valley University, Orem, Utah. Skousen is also known for his work on exemplar-based theories of language and quantum computing of analogical modeling.*