

# BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TEXT

*Editor's Introduction for the Maxwell Institute Study Edition*

After the angel Moroni delivered the gold plates to Joseph Smith in September 1827, Joseph began to dictate the translation to his first scribes: his wife Emma and Martin Harris. Persecution slowed their efforts and forced them to move to Harmony [Oakland], Pennsylvania, but using the Nephite “interpreters” that had been buried with the plates, as well as a seer stone—both of which Joseph later referred to by the biblical term “Urim and Thummim”—he had produced about 116 pages by the next summer. In June Martin took the manuscript to New York to show his wife, where it was stolen. The gold plates were taken back by Moroni and the translation ceased until the plates were returned to Joseph in September 1828 (see D&C 3 and 10).

Translation efforts were sporadic until the arrival of Oliver Cowdery at Harmony in early April 1829. With Oliver as the principal scribe, the entire Book of Mormon was translated in a three-month period between April and June (perhaps sixty-five working days), at a rate of about eight printed pages per day. Joseph dictated the words one time through, beginning at the book of Mosiah and continuing through Moroni, then returning to translate the small plates (1 Nephi–Omni), which substituted for the material lost by Martin Harris. Joseph generally translated by putting a seer stone in his hat and then placing his face in the hat to block out the ambient light while he dictated to scribes. There is still no consensus among LDS scholars as to how the translation process worked. Some think that Joseph received spiritual impressions through the seer stone that he then put into his own words, while others believe—along with the early eyewitnesses—that Joseph read aloud a preexisting translation that appeared in the stone. Joseph himself never gave any details and simply asserted that it was done “through the gift and power of God” (title page).

In July 1829, an agreement was reached with E. B. Grandin, a Palmyra publisher, to print the book. Mindful of the loss of the 116 pages, Joseph had Oliver make a copy for the printer’s use. Like the original manuscript, the printer’s manuscript consisted of a long string of words with chapter divisions but no punctuation. Today about 28 percent of the original manuscript is extant, as is nearly the whole of the printer’s manuscript. Most of the first edition was typeset from the printer’s manuscript, but one-sixth of the text (Helaman 13.17 to the end of Mormon) was set from the original manuscript, probably during the time that Joseph and Oliver took the printer’s manuscript to Canada to procure the copyright there. Punctuation and paragraphing were added to the text by the typesetter, John Gilbert, and the first edition was offered for sale in March 1830.

For the second edition, in 1837, Joseph Smith made nearly three thousand changes, almost all of which were minor adjustments to regularize the grammar or improve the style (for example, 952 instances of *which* changed to *who* or *whom*, and forty-seven deletions of “it came to pass”). A few additional changes were made in the 1840 edition, along with some corrections based on the original manuscript. The book was first published in verses rather than paragraphs in 1879, when shorter chapters and numbered verses were introduced by

apostle Orson Pratt, and several more grammatical revisions were incorporated into the 1920 edition. The current official edition, from 1981, restored several dozen readings from the manuscripts, with a few changes in spelling and punctuation being added in 2013. In addition, the subtitle “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” was introduced in 1982.

Aside from numerous grammatical and stylistic revisions, usually of just a word or two, there are only about a dozen verses where deliberate changes were adopted that shifted the meaning or clarified doctrine. Most of those were made by Joseph Smith in 1837 or 1840. Recent analyses of the manuscripts and printed editions have brought to light several hundred inadvertent changes due to human errors in transcribing, copying, or typesetting. This study edition includes footnotes that document the most important variants, both accidental and intentional. The former are indicated by readings in italics from the original and printer’s manuscripts (O and P). Deliberate changes can be identified by the inclusion of the current reading in roman typeface, along with the edition in which the change first appeared and the initials of the person responsible, if known (Joseph Smith—JS; Oliver Cowdery—OC; and John Gilbert—JG). In cases where even the earliest readings appear problematic, possible emendations are suggested. These are based on the work of Royal Skousen in his *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*. Emendations that have been accepted by Skousen in his *Earliest Text* are preceded by the acronym ATV; those that he considers possible but less compelling are preceded by the abbreviation “Poss,” for *possibly*.

Royal Skousen, a professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, is the central figure in the academic analysis of the Book of Mormon text, including its origins, transmission, variants, and grammar. Since 2001, he has published typographical facsimiles of the original and printer’s manuscripts (the latter has been reissued with photographs as part of the Joseph Smith Papers Project), a six-volume commentary on textual variants, and a scholarly reconstruction of the earliest text as it was first dictated (published by Yale University Press in 2009). Because readability is a primary goal of this edition, there has been no attempt to document the nonstandard grammar of the manuscripts or the 1830 printing; rather, the footnotes here highlight instances in which earlier readings of the original and printer’s manuscripts may be more accurate, clearer, or more felicitous. All of the textual notes in this edition are derived from Skousen’s work, as are many of the suggestions for alternative punctuation and word order. The notes here, however, are simplified, dispensing with Skousen’s indications of variants within a source, original and corrected readings in the manuscripts, spelling anomalies, and types of manuscript changes. For full discussions of any of the variants, consult his *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*. Future volumes in Skousen’s Critical Text Project will provide a detailed examination of the vocabulary and grammar of the Book of Mormon, along with a comprehensive history of the text.

This *Maxwell Institute Study Edition* reproduces the official 1981 (2013) text exactly, aside from the modifications in punctuation needed for the addition of quotation marks and poetic stanzas. It also includes the original chapter divisions (since these were apparently on the gold plates and thus were intended by the ancient authors), modern paragraphing, superscripted verse numbers, indentation of embedded documents, a hypothetical

map based on internal references, and multichapter and section headings that highlight the narrative context and structure. These headings are not intended as doctrinal interpretations, but rather are helpful indications of who is speaking to whom and in what context. They often employ key words borrowed from the passage that follows as a reminder of the general topic. At the top of each page are running heads that locate the page in both the 1830 edition (using Roman numerals for chapter numbers) and the current edition. As in the 2013 revision, the scriptural text itself is in roman typeface while various study helps, which are not authoritative, are in italics. The footnotes point out textual variants, direct quotations, references to specific events, chronological markers, alternative punctuation, and a few explanations of language, literary forms, and transmission. These explanations represent only a sampling of the kinds of features that could be observed from close readings of the text. Boldface type is occasionally used to show examples of intertextuality with the Bible and within the Book of Mormon itself. The narrative complexity and coherence of the Book of Mormon—highlighted in this edition—offer some of the strongest evidences of its historicity and miraculous translation. As we learn to read this sacred text as carefully as possible, with detailed attention to language, structure, and historical context, its message of salvation through Jesus Christ will become more compelling and its lessons for life more clear.

### *Selected Scholarly Resources*

- Bushman, Richard Lyman. *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984.
- Mackay, Michael Hubbard, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat. *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon*. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015.
- Skousen, Royal. *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. 2nd ed. Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2017 (the first edition is available online at [bookofmormoncentral.org](http://bookofmormoncentral.org) and [mormoninterpreter.com](http://mormoninterpreter.com)).
- , ed. *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009 (available online at [bookofmormoncentral.org](http://bookofmormoncentral.org)).
- . *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*. 6 vols. Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2016–.
- Skousen, Royal, and Robin Scott Jensen, eds. *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*. 2 parts. Facsimile edition. Vol. 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015.
- Welch, John W., ed. *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*. 2nd ed. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

### *A Few Sources for Specific Footnotes*

- Conkling, J. Christopher. "Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites." *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 108–17, 130–32. [Alma 3.3; 21.2; 44.22]
- Johnson, D. Lynn. "The Missing Scripture." *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 2 (1994): 84–93. [Hel 14.25]
- Nickerson, Matthew. "Nephi's Psalm: 2 Nephi 4:16–35 in the Light of Form-Critical Analysis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 26–42. [2 Ne 4.13]
- Ricks, Stephen D. "Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6." In *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom,"* edited by John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, 233–275. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998. [Mos 2.1]
- Skousen, Royal. "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript." In *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds, 61–93. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997. [1 Ne 1.1; Alma 41.14]
- Thomas, Mark D. "Moroni: The Final Voice." *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 1 (2003): 88–99, 111–20. [Morm 8.1]
- Welch, John W. "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon." In *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds and Charles D. Tate, 33–52. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1982. [Mos 3.19; 5.12; Alma 41.14]
- . "A Masterpiece: Alma 36." In *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, edited by John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, 114–31. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991. [Alma 36.1]
- . "Textual Consistency." In *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, edited by John W. Welch, 21–23. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992. [1 Ne 1.8; Mos 2.13; 3.8; Alma 36.22; Hel 14.12]

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LDS resources on the history, transmission, and translation of the Book of Mormon can be found at the Joseph Smith Papers website at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org) and in various Gospel Topics essays at [lds.org](http://lds.org).

[Note: Since this is a work of sacred scripture, all the editor's royalties are donated directly to the Humanitarian Aid Fund of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.]