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Abstract: This paper relates the author's views on the significance and exceptional nature of Royal Skousen's critical text of the Book of Mormon, which will be completed this year.



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Royal Skousen's Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

Roger Terry

Between 1984 and 1986, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) published a critical text of the Book of Mormon. While this early publication was useful in certain ways, it was also woefully inadequate. It was, for instance, based on a computerized text of the 1830 printed edition of the Book of Mormon rather than on the remnants of the two handwritten manuscripts.¹ Recognizing its inadequacies, Brigham Young University linguistics professor Royal Skousen began in 1988 what would become a thirty-seven-year endeavor and his life's work: a fully professional critical text of the Book of Mormon.²

Skousen's critical text, when completed in 2025, will include the following: seventeen hefty reference books, the Yale University Press-published *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, and an electronic, searchable collation of the extant portions of the two handwritten manuscripts and twenty significant editions of the Book of Mormon published by both The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now Community of Christ).

1. Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 5: Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2021), xxxiii–xxxviii, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr3/jsppr3-sub-om>.

2. For details on how to purchase any of Skousen's critical text volumes, see the BYU Studies website, Book of Mormon Critical Text Project Series, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/book-of-mormon-critical-text-project>.

Although associated with FARMS at the outset, Skousen's project was independent. But in 2001, it became part of BYU when FARMS was folded into the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. In 2015, the project moved to *BYU Studies*, and from that time until my retirement as editorial director in spring of 2024, I was the primary in-house proofreader for the volumes published by *BYU Studies*. Needless to say, I became very familiar with Skousen's work, and through this familiarity, I came to two conclusions: first, that it would be very difficult to overstate the importance of this project, and second, that there is likely no one else on earth who could have produced this monumental work of scholarship.

Why a Critical Text?

Before we can understand why a critical text of the Book of Mormon is so essential, we must understand what, exactly, a critical text is. A critical text is a product of textual criticism, which

is a branch of textual scholarship, philology, and literary criticism that is concerned with the identification of textual variants, or different versions, of either manuscripts (mss) or of printed books. . . .

The objective of the textual critic's work is to provide a better understanding of the creation and historical transmission of the text and its variants. This understanding may lead to the production of a **critical edition** containing a scholarly curated text. If a scholar has several versions of a manuscript but no known original, then established methods of textual criticism can be used to seek to reconstruct the original text as closely as possible.³

This is a fairly accurate description of the work Skousen has been involved in for the past thirty-seven years.

Skousen's own definition of "critical text" lines up well with the foregoing description. In a 1990 *BYU Studies* article announcing his own project, he wrote,

A critical edition is composed of two main parts, the critical text itself and an apparatus (consisting of notes at the bottom of the page, below the critical text). Usually the critical text attempts to represent the original form of the text, while the apparatus shows the textual variants and their sources. The editors of the critical edition decide which textual

3. "Textual Criticism," Wikipedia, accessed January 16, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism, bold in original.

variant best represents the original and put that in the critical text. The apparatus shows all the (significant) variants of the text and the sources for those variants (manuscripts, published texts, and conjectures). The apparatus thus allows the reader to evaluate the decisions of the editors.⁴

Skousen then identified several reasons for creating a critical edition of the Book of Mormon. First, the validity of any analyses of the Book of Mormon “may well depend on the text the analyses are based on.”⁵ Second, “a critical edition of the Book of Mormon is to facilitate studies of linguistic influences.” For instance, “numerous studies have been made on the question of Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon. Yet it turns out that the original text actually contained a number of potential Hebraisms that have been removed by later editing.”⁶ A third reason a critical edition is needed is that “there are still textual errors that have thus far escaped correction,” such as errors introduced when copying the printer’s manuscript from the original manuscript. There has also been considerable editing of the text over the years, and “sometimes this editing has introduced errors into the text.”⁷

To produce a critical text, it was necessary to gain access to the primary textual sources. Unfortunately, most of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon no longer exists. In 1841, “Joseph [Smith] placed this manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House . . . ; when it was retrieved in 1882, most of the manuscript had been destroyed by water and mold. Today, only about 28% remains, most of which is held by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”⁸ Skousen “received on loan from the LDS Church Historical Department a set of black-and-white ultraviolet photographs of the original manuscript.”⁹ Several other fragments of the original manuscript also existed, as well as a few forgeries created by Mark Hofmann. Skousen gained access to these fragments,

4. Royal Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 1 (1990): 41.

5. Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition,” 42.

6. Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition,” 42.

7. Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition,” 44–45.

8. Daniel C. Peterson and Royal Skousen, “A Critical Text: An Interview with Royal Skousen,” interview conducted via email September 10, 2019, published January 11, 2020, The Interpreter Foundation, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/a-critical-text/>.

9. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 1, *Grammatical Variation*, The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3 (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2016), 3.

identified the forgeries and, in 1988, began making a transcript of the surviving portions of the original manuscript.

Fortunately, a second handwritten manuscript was created, mostly by Oliver Cowdery, which is known as the printer's manuscript. This is the copy that was taken to E. B. Grandin's print shop in Palmyra and used by compositor John Gilbert to set the type for most of the 1830 printed edition. Of this manuscript, all but three lines at the bottom of the first leaf have survived. The printer's manuscript was in the possession of the RLDS Church when Skousen began his project. The RLDS Church made available to him clear photographs of the entire printer's manuscript. By 1992, however, Skousen realized he needed color photographs of the manuscript, so he arranged for his brother Nevin (a professional photographer) to photograph the manuscript at the RLDS library in Independence, Missouri.

From the photographs he received, Skousen and paid research assistants were able to make initial transcripts of both manuscripts and "then check them against the actual manuscripts, including newly discovered fragments of O [the original manuscript] held by the Wilford Wood family that accounted for 2% of the original text."¹⁰ Creating the transcripts consumed the first thirteen years of the critical text project, but these transcripts made possible the "apparatus" that makes up the bulk of the published critical text.

The Published Volumes

In May 2001, the first two volumes of the critical text were published. Volume 1 was *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text*. Volume 2 was *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts*. Skousen explained, "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. . . . With the publication of these two volumes, all the legitimate manuscript sources for the Book of Mormon text were now accessible."¹¹

10. Peterson and Skousen, "Critical Text."

11. Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 1:6.

Initially, Skousen intended to publish volume 3, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, next, but he “quickly realized that in order to determine the history of the text, . . . [he] first needed to figure out just what that original text was.”¹² Therefore, he first undertook a thorough, verse-by-verse analysis of the two handwritten manuscripts and twenty significant published editions of the Book of Mormon. To complete this analysis, he created an electronic, searchable collation that compared the text across all these manuscripts and published editions. Volume 4, then, includes six books, or “parts,” that examine every significant non-grammatical variation in the text over time, as well as several conjectural emendations.¹³ *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (ATV) was published between 2004 and 2009.

“My goal,” wrote Skousen, “has always been to determine the original text of the Book of Mormon—to the extent that it can be determined by scholarly means. Of course, this goal is never fully achievable since one cannot be sure that the proposed original text is the actual original text, especially since we are missing 72 percent of O [the original manuscript]. So we end up with what I have termed the earliest text.”¹⁴ *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* was published by Yale University Press in 2009 and does not represent either the original manuscript, the printer’s manuscript, or any of the printed editions. Instead, it is the text Skousen believes Joseph Smith dictated to the scribes, based on his analysis of the various sources. Consequently, *The Earliest Text* is the version of the Book of Mormon that serious scholars refer to when doing Book of Mormon research. It is a distillation of Skousen’s careful analysis of every word in every verse of Mormon’s book.¹⁵

12. Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 1:7.

13. Explaining conjectural emendations, Skousen wrote, “Sometimes we have a passage where the reading just doesn’t make sense. When anyone proposes a new reading for a questionable passage, one that they believe works better, we examine all the evidence for accepting (and rejecting) that conjectural emendation. . . . Conjectural emendations have always been a part of the text: Oliver Cowdery and other scribes made conjectures when they copied the text, as did the 1830 typesetter. . . . Later editors have made numerous conjectural emendations, especially Joseph Smith for the 1837 and 1840 editions as well as James E. Talmage for the 1920 edition.” Peterson and Skousen, “Critical Text.”

14. Royal Skousen, “The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 82.

15. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 2nd ed. (Yale University Press, 2022). *The Earliest Text*, 2009 edition, is available on the Scripture Central website, “The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text,” <https://bookofmormoncentral.org/content/book-mormon-earliest-text>. The 2022 paperback second edition is available for purchase, <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300263374/the-book-of-mormon/>.

The Yale edition introduces two major innovations. First is its textual accuracy. Second is the presence of 606 readings that have never appeared in any 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.”¹⁶ Of these emendations, 187 appear in both editions.

The most important textual question regards how many of these new readings actually make a difference in the meaning of the text. Or, as Skousen puts it, how many of these new readings would make a difference when translating the text into a foreign language? The answer is 241.¹⁷

By the time Skousen finished the six parts of volume 4 (ATV), he had made occasional “adjustments to [his] analyses, and sometimes [he] revised [his] proposed reading of the original text.”¹⁸ These adjustments were published in ninety-eight pages of addenda appended to part 6 of volume 4. Since this was not an ideal way to deal with these corrections, in 2017, he published a second edition of ATV, where these new readings (and a few that he added after the first edition was published) appear in their proper place in the six parts of volume 4.

Once ATV was complete, Skousen was ready to tackle volume 3, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*. Initially, he had planned for volume 3 to contain six parts, but as the research and writing unfolded, he realized he had more material than would fit in six books, so he added two parts. The first two parts of volume 3 are titled *Grammatical Variation*. In creating ATV, Skousen did not include a complete list of all the grammatical changes that had occurred in the text over its long history. And there were many grammatical variations, enough to fill 1,281 pages with examples and analysis. After *Grammatical Variation* was published, Skousen told me that I was one of only five people in the whole world who had read it cover to cover, and I can attest that it is no page-turner. It is a reference volume intended for serious researchers. But it is a testament to the careful, detailed attention Skousen always gave to the text of the Book of Mormon.

16. Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 1:8.

17. For a sample of these significant emendations, see Royal Skousen, “Some Textual Changes for a Scholarly Study of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2012): 99–117.

18. Skousen, “Language of the Original Text,” 82.

Much of the work done by *Grammatical Variation* was to show how editing changed the text of the Book of Mormon, and most of that editing removed nonstandard English from the book, including some archaic King James language. But one significant point of *Grammatical Variation* is that much of the nonstandard usage found in the Book of Mormon original text was not part of Joseph Smith's regional dialect. Rather, it was part of Early Modern English, a stage in the development of the English language that lasted from the late 1400s to the early 1700s. Much of the evidence for this claim comes from linguist Stanford Carmack, who is listed as a collaborator on the title pages of all parts of volume 3 except part 6. His work is particularly prominent in parts 3 and 4, *The Nature of the Original Language*.

Skousen's introductory description of parts 3 and 4 offers a succinct summary of this portion of his project:

Here in *The Nature of the Original Language*, again with the assistance of Carmack, I present the linguistic and historical evidence that persuades us that this archaic interpretation of the original Book of Mormon text applies not just to the nonstandard grammar but to all aspects of the Book of Mormon. Here in parts 3 and 4 we lay out the considerable evidence that virtually all the original language of the Book of Mormon—its words, phrases, expressions, grammatical forms, and syntactic patterns—are archaic English. In addition, I argue that the themes of the Book of Mormon are not the issues of Joseph Smith's time and place, but instead represent the religious and cultural issues that were prevalent during the Protestant Reformation (through the 1500s and 1600s).¹⁹

Parts 3 and 4 include such topics as archaic and late vocabulary, archaic grammar, archaic phrases and expressions, historical contexts, nonarchaic language, unique language, archaic syntax, Joseph Smith as author, King James vocabulary and phrases, and King James grammar. Part 3 begins, however, with a fifty-three-page essay by Skousen titled "The Original Text: Its Language and Issues." This essay discusses three common views regarding the translation of the Book of Mormon, views that Skousen accepted as reasonable early in his work on the critical text:

1. Joseph Smith received ideas and expressed them in his own language.

19. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 3, *The Nature of the Original Language*, The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3 (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2018), 3.

2. The language in the text is Joseph Smith's upstate New York dialect, and the meaning of the words represents Joseph's understanding.
3. The Book of Mormon is "for our times," meaning that the book deals with religious and political issues prevalent in Joseph Smith's time and place.

A result of Skousen's work, however, is that he now believes all three of these views are wrong to one degree or another. The evidence, he concludes, indicates that the text was revealed word for word, and the actual language of the original text did not come from either Joseph Smith or his environment. And Skousen presents a lot of evidence.

Part 5 of volume 3 is *The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon*. Anyone who is acquainted with the Book of Mormon knows that it contains several long excerpts from the King James Bible, particularly the Sermon on the Mount and several chapters from Isaiah. But there is much more King James language in the Book of Mormon than these long quotations. In his analysis of this language, Skousen set parameters to determine what he considered a quotation. He somewhat arbitrarily determined that a passage in the Book of Mormon that was identical to the standard King James text and was sixteen words or longer could be considered a quotation. Because many of the long passages that come from the King James Bible include multiple word changes, Skousen found only thirty-six word-strings that he considered quotations.

There are more strings that are shorter than sixteen words. These Skousen classified as paraphrastic quotations. He lists eighty-three examples of paraphrastic quotations, including all strings that are between seven and fifteen words long and "a few cases of textual blending where the longest string of identical words can be as low as one or two."²⁰

Skousen's analysis of biblical language in the Book of Mormon yields some surprising findings. First, nearly every biblical quotation comes from the King James Bible, but not the original 1611 version. Most likely, the printing that is quoted in the Book of Mormon was published between 1770 and 1820. However, one particular quotation ("and upon all the ships of Tarshish," Isa. 2:16, 2 Ne. 12:16) comes from the Masoretic Text, which is both unexpected and puzzling.

20. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 5, *The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon*, *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3* (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2019), 10.

Second, “when the Book of Mormon biblical quotation differs from the King James reading, we often find that the original Book of Mormon form of the biblical quote is ungrammatical.”²¹

Third, there are three anachronistic problems involving biblical quotations: (1) Words appear in the Book of Mormon biblical quotations that the King James translators got wrong; there are also cultural translations that are historically incorrect. (2) The Book of Mormon includes text from the Textus Receptus (the text King James translators relied on) that does not appear in the earliest biblical manuscripts. (3) The Book of Mormon identifies text as being from Isaiah that biblical scholars associate with a “Second Isaiah,” who lived after the fall of Jerusalem, long after Lehi and his family departed. Skousen points out that there are ways to deal with the Second Isaiah problem, but “it isn’t necessary to do so.”²²

These anachronisms, Skousen concludes, are problematic “only if we assume that the Book of Mormon translation literally represents what was on the plates.” But the evidence presented in parts 3 and 4 of volume 3 suggests that the Book of Mormon text is based on Early Modern English and that the themes in the book are more connected to the Protestant Reformation than to either Joseph Smith’s time or ancient America. “What this means is that the Book of Mormon is a creative and cultural translation of what was on the plates, not a literal one. Based on the linguistic evidence, the translation must have involved serious intervention from the English-language translator, who was not Joseph Smith.”²³ This translation was then transmitted to Joseph Smith word for word, which he read to the scribes, who sometimes imperfectly recorded Joseph’s words in the original manuscript.

Part 6 of volume 3, *Spelling in the Manuscripts and Editions*, is exactly that, an analysis of all the spelling variations that appear in either handwritten or printed versions of the Book of Mormon. This book, then, is all about the scribes. Skousen deals with three important questions regarding scribal misspellings: First, did John Gilbert, Grandin’s typesetter, adopt Oliver Cowdery’s misspellings, or did he correct them? Second, how good were the scribes? And third, can misspelled words tell us anything important about the Book of Mormon and its dictation? To answer the first, Gilbert did correct many of Cowdery’s misspellings.

21. Skousen, *King James Quotations*, 5:12.

22. Skousen, *King James Quotations*, 5:6.

23. Skousen, *King James Quotations*, 5:6.

Regarding the scribes, Martin Harris was a relatively good speller but had a high rate of scribal slips; Oliver Cowdery's spelling improved over time, and his scribal slips were consistently low; and both Christian Whitmer and Hyrum Smith were terrible spellers. Lastly, scribal misspellings do reveal clues about the translator, including how Joseph Smith pronounced certain names, such as Amalickiah (stress on the first syllable, not the second, as we now say it) and Mosiah (identical to Mesiah), and how Joseph sometimes spelled out names and other times did not. Misspellings by the scribes have also been useful in detecting forgeries.

Part 7 of volume 3 is titled *The Early Transmissions of the Text* and “describes the history of the Book of Mormon text, beginning with its initial dictation in 1828–29 by Joseph Smith to his scribes (chiefly Oliver Cowdery), which resulted in the original manuscript.”²⁴ Skousen then discusses the creation of the printer's manuscript and the publishing of the 1830 printed edition as well as the two editions (1837 and 1840) that were edited by Joseph Smith. Skousen stresses the importance of the original manuscript, even though only 27.8 percent of it is extant. It gives us “details of how Joseph Smith translated, including specific evidence in the manuscript that supports what eye-witnesses of the dictation claimed about his translating.”²⁵

A major chapter “examines the statements by all the individuals who witnessed firsthand the translation process and compares those statements against the evidence found in the manuscripts.”²⁶ The next chapter discusses the three earliest transmissions of the text—from the original manuscript to the printer's manuscript and from each of these manuscripts to the 1830 edition—giving evidence that the copying of the text caused it to become longer and more difficult, which is not what textual critics expect. Skousen then delves into the changes themselves, examining all 1,005 substantive changes made in copying from the extant portion of the original manuscript to the printer's manuscript and all 741 substantive changes made by John Gilbert, the typesetter.

24. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 7, *The Early Transmissions of the Text*, *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3* (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2024), 11.

25. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 11.

26. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 11.

The last three chapters analyze the first three printed editions. The in-press changes in the 1830 edition “show Gilbert’s unrelenting effort to make the printed . . . text read as accurately as possible.”²⁷ Skousen devotes 196 pages to the 3,168 changes that Joseph Smith made to the 1837 edition. Smith “worked hard to reduce the ungrammatical usage and the archaic language style of the original text of the Book of Mormon.”²⁸ In the final chapter, Skousen analyzes the changes that were made in the 1840 edition, where Joseph used “the original manuscript to restore some of the original readings that were lost when Oliver Cowdery had earlier copied the text”²⁹ from the original to the printer’s manuscript.

Part 8, *Textual Criticism of the Book of Mormon*, is scheduled to be published in 2025. Of it, Skousen writes,

In this last part, I will consider the principles of textual criticism and how they have been followed (or not followed) in the transmission of the Book of Mormon text. There will be a history of previous attempts at doing critical text work on the Book of Mormon along with, of course, a detailed history of this critical text project (which began in 1988). Finally, I will turn to various issues that have continually beset those attempting to do critical text work on the Book of Mormon. One particular issue has been the question of conjectured emendations and the degree to which they have been allowed in the text.³⁰

Finally, volume 5 of the critical text project, *A Complete Electronic Collation of the Book of Mormon*, will be released after all eight parts of volume 3 have been published. It is a “computerized collation, with its WordCruncher searchable electronic comparison of the two manuscripts against 20 significant editions of the Book of Mormon (from 1830 through 1981), showing every difference in the text (not only word differences, but also every difference in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, chapter system, and versification).”³¹ This electronic collation will be indispensable for anyone doing research on the text of

27. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 13.

28. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 14.

29. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 14.

30. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 6, *Spelling in the Manuscripts and Editions*, *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3* (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2020), 4–5.

31. Skousen, *Spelling*, 5.

the Book of Mormon. Skousen will make this available free of charge. This is a very generous gesture and demonstrates his commitment to encouraging further research on the Book of Mormon text, to which he has dedicated nearly forty years of his life.

In the foreword to part 7, Skousen mentions four other digital or print publications that resulted from the critical text project:

The Book of Mormon: The Original Text, with Grammatical Tagging, 2023. This is a grammaticalized version of the original text available in WordCruncher.

1830 Book of Mormon, 2018. This book “allows WordCruncher access to an accurately reproduced electronic version of the original first edition of the Book of Mormon, along with its many in-press changes.”³²

Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 2015. This volume of the Joseph Smith Papers includes a facsimile transcription of the printer’s manuscript and photographs of all pages in the printer’s manuscript.³³

Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 2021. This volume of the Joseph Smith Papers includes a facsimile transcription of the extant portion of the original manuscript along with photographs of the pages and page fragments.³⁴

A Few Observations

Having been involved in proofreading almost all of volume 3 of Skousen’s critical text project and having referred quite often to volume 4, I am fairly well acquainted with the scope and depth of his work, and it is an astounding accomplishment. Skousen’s research has answered many questions about the Book of Mormon text, but it has also raised many questions—some of them unexpected and even disconcerting. But one attribute of Royal Skousen that I have come to admire is his willingness to simply follow the evidence where it leads. And sometimes it leads to inconclusive outcomes. Skousen is very open about his spiritual testimony of the truthfulness of

32. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 4.

33. See Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2015); Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 2: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Alma 36–Moroni 10*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2015), <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr3/jsppr3-sub-pm>.

34. See Skousen and Jensen, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 5: Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*.

the Book of Mormon, but he is also determined to tease out as many scholarly insights from the text itself as time and energy will permit.

Another of Skousen's enviable qualities is his willingness to give others credit for their discoveries and for pointing him in certain directions. One example is Renee Bangerter, Skousen's research assistant in the 1990s. Under his direction, she "investigated the historical change that various Book of Mormon words had undergone. Most of her research [which appeared in her master's thesis] dealt with words that had changed in meaning since the 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon."³⁵ In her work, she discovered many words, such as *break*, *mar*, and *sermon*, whose meanings in the Book of Mormon date back to the 1500s and 1600s. This finding led to Skousen's search for other early English words and syntax in the book. Eventually, Skousen became acquainted with Stanford Carmack, whose research has unearthed a long list of Early Modern English words and usages in the Book of Mormon.

The prevalence of Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon is both fascinating and perplexing. It raises questions about not just when the Book of Mormon was translated into English but also what exactly this book is. It is obviously not a product of the imagination of Joseph Smith. It contains not only a variety of early English words and terms that survived into Joseph Smith's time but also various early meanings that had dropped out of English usage before Joseph received the translation.

Despite the presence of so much Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon text, Skousen is adamant that the Book of Mormon is not an Early Modern English text. Even though Skousen and Carmack claim that the words and phrases in the book "mainly date from the 1530s through the 1730s" and the syntax in the book "best matches that of the second half of the 1500s,"³⁶ the Book of Mormon is not an Early Modern English book. All you have to do is look at a book from the late 1500s to understand this. For instance, here is an excerpt from John Calvin's commentary on the first epistle of St. John, translated into English and published in about 1580:

Againe, as he is the onely true Priest, who is sanctified of God to offer vnto hym a most sweete Sacrifice to reconcile vs vnto hymself, and

35. Skousen, *Nature of the Original Language*, 3:9; Renee Bangerter, "Since Joseph Smith's Time: Lexical Semantic Shifts in the Book of Mormon" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1998), 16–18, 41–43, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4500/>.

36. Skousen, "Language of the Original Text," 105.

as by his alone execution of this office, and offeryng of hymself, we haue by hym a sure peace and free entrance into the presentes of the Lorde, as by hym all enmitie is doen awaie, and there remaineth inaccomptable peace and fauour for euermore, so we are most strongly to cast out of sight the sleighes of Sathan and all the deuises of men, as moste vnclene filthinesse for euer, and not to set our selues, or admit others of what sorte soeuer, to stande for vs in this duetie, to spoyle vs of assured safetie, and the Lorde Iesus of this honour, that he alone and none but he is the Priest of his Church, and hath fully and alsufficiently performed whatsoeuer appertaineth to their peace for euermore.³⁷

The most obvious difference here is the archaic spelling, but even if the spelling were modernized, this text would not be as readable as the Book of Mormon, which is not known for its flowing prose. This excerpt includes the word *inaccomptable*, which is unfamiliar to modern readers and not found even in the Oxford English Dictionary. It is possible that this word is a transcription error, but Early Modern English used many words that are unfamiliar to modern readers, such as Shakespeare's use of "even-pleach'd"³⁸ (evenly intertwined) or "unanel'd"³⁹ (not having received extreme unction) or "muddy-mettled"⁴⁰ (dull-spirited). Skousen has observed of the Book of Mormon that "the vocabulary of the text has been filtered so that no truly obsolete words from Early Modern English get through (except in the long quotations from the King James Bible, with its archaic examples like *besom*, *carbuncle*, *tabret*, and *crisping pin*). Nonetheless, the words that occur in the Book of Mormon proper are recognizable as current words in English, but they often take on archaic meanings that neither Joseph Smith nor his scribes understood."⁴¹ The obvious next question here is, who did this filtering? Skousen doesn't hazard a guess and suggests we may never know in this life exactly who actually translated the text or filtered it for modern readers.

Skousen and Carmack's claim that the Book of Mormon's vocabulary, usage, and syntax derive largely from Early Modern English also

37. *The comentaries of M. Iohn Caluin vpon the first Epistle of Sainct Ihon, and vpon the Epistle of Iude wherein accordyng to the truthe of the woordes of the holie Ghost, he most excellently openeth and cleareth the point of true iustification with God, and sanctification by the Spirit of Christ, by the effects that he bryngeth forthe in the regeneration*, trans. W. H. (London: Ihon Kyngstone [and T. East], for Iohn Harrison the yonger, ca. 1580), [vi], Early English Books Online 2, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A17649.0001.001/7:2>.

38. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, act 5, scene 2, line 42.

39. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 5, line 77.

40. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2, line 567.

41. Skousen, "Language of the Original Text," 106.

raises questions that a peer reviewer mentioned to BYU Studies in his blind review of an article by Carmack: “This approach leaves a host of questions unasked, such as why God has a particular investment in early modern English. As an early modernist, I am anything but opposed to this proposition, but that language has no obvious connection either to Book of Mormon peoples or to the 19th century American frontier.” Also, referring to the Carmack article’s tendency to simply list a variety of examples where Book of Mormon vocabulary appears in Early Modern English texts, the reviewer commented, “Seeing William Caxton (1473) appear alongside Richard Baxter (1673) as evidence of the same language strikes me as odd. English underwent massive transformation during those two centuries: reading a Caxton incunabulum and a Baxter treatise are two very different experiences, both materially and linguistically. Which English are we really talking about?”⁴²

These are questions for future researchers to investigate, and certainly more will arise as our collective understanding of the book increases. If Skousen’s work has proved anything, it is that the Book of Mormon is an incredibly complex document. I have likened it before to a million-piece jigsaw puzzle,⁴³ and we have barely begun to put the border together. But, to mix metaphors, Skousen has taken us miles down the road toward a more complete understanding. The questions he has answered have been invaluable, but the questions his work has raised have opened doors for research in a variety of directions. Skousen’s critical text of the Book of Mormon is a work that will be relevant for decades to come. It is unquestionably the crowning achievement of a dedicated, careful, and gifted scholar.

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42. Peer review of article submitted to BYU Studies, in author’s possession and used with the reviewer’s permission.

43. Roger Terry, “The Book of Mormon Translation Puzzle,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 177, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol23/iss1/10>.