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Changing Critics' Criticisms of Book of Mormon Changes

Brian C. Hales

Abstract: *In early 1830 Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon, a 269,938-word volume that discusses religious themes intermingled with a history of ancient American peoples.[1] Claiming it was scripture like the Bible,[2] in 1841 he declared it to be "the most correct of any book on earth and the keystone of our religion."[3] Yet, many changes in the text of the Book of Mormon can be detected when comparing the original manuscript to the version available today. These changes have served as a lightning rod for some critics who imply that a divinely inspired book should not require any alterations. This article examines the types of changes that have occurred while trying to assign levels of significance and identify Joseph's motives in making those alterations in the 1837 and 1840 reprintings of the book.*

Joseph Smith reported receiving the golden plates on September 22, 1827, while living with his parents in Manchester, New York. Within weeks, local persecution and attempts to steal the plates prompted Joseph and Emma to move to be with her family, the Hales, in Harmony, Pennsylvania.[4]

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1. This word count was calculated using Microsoft Word and the text from http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830/1, after removing the witnesses' testimonies, copyright page, and bracketed insertions.

2. D&C 42:12, Articles of Faith 1:8.

3. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898: TS,* ed. Scott G. Kenney, vol. 2, *1841–1845* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 139.

4. "History, circa Summer 1832," The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/6.

Joseph eventually purchased a home close to the Hale residence, where he and Emma lived for the next two and a half years.[5] Though small, it allowed some privacy for Joseph and his scribes. There the 116-page Book of Lehi and a large portion of the Book of Mormon text were translated. The Book of Lehi manuscript pages were lost by Martin Harris, and Joseph reported God withdrew his privilege to translate for a season.[6]

Oliver Cowdery visited the Smiths in Harmony on April 5, 1829. Two days later, the two began the translation of the Book of Mormon, which proceeded at a more rapid pace.[7] Due to persecution arising from rumors regarding the translation, during the first week of June, the Smiths and Oliver Cowdery moved by buckboard over 100 miles to the Peter Whitmer farm in Fayette, New York.[8] By the end of the month, the final 150 pages were translated, with some of the Whitmers also acting as scribes.[9]

The words dictated by Joseph Smith between April 7 and June 30, 1829, were published with few alterations. However, Joseph intervened in the 1837 and 1840 printings to make multiple changes in the previously published wordings. Other emendations have been authorized by subsequent Church leaders. Several authors have documented different tallies of alternations made in the various versions of the Book of Mormon (see below). Understanding the quantity and quality of these emendations may be helpful in understanding how Joseph Smith created the text in the first place.

How Many Changes in the Book of Mormons?

While early critics noticed changes between various editions of the Book of Mormon, the first book to focus strictly upon those changes was Lamoni Call's 1898, *2000 Changes in the Book of Mormon*. The methodology employed by Call was unsophisticated: "[T]he work of comparing the

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5. Mark Staker, "Isaac and Elizabeth Hale in Their Endless Mountain Home," *Mormon Historical Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 82, http://mormonhistoricsites.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Isaac-andElizabeth-Hale.pdf.

6. "History, circa Summer 1832," The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/6.

7. Joseph Smith History 1:66–67.

8. "History, circa June–October 1839 [Draft 1]," The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 14, 2017, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-october-1839-draft-1/3.

9. John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Press/Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 108–10.

books was a long, tedious job for a working man. Many hours were spent at the work when the eyes refused to stand guard as they should, desiring more to be locked in slumber."[10] Subsequently, other authors pointed to his work in their critiques of the Book of Mormon.[11]

Jerald and Sandra Tanner's 1965 publication, *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon*, has probably had a greater influence. Much like Lamoni Call's approach in the 1890s, Jerald Tanner sat down eighty years later with an 1830 edition and a 1964 edition of the Book of Mormon and annotated all changes he could identify. His count almost doubled Call's. In their introduction, the Tanners also allege a conspiracy by Church leaders to conceal the changes: "The changes made in the Book of Mormon and in Joseph Smith's revelations have apparently caused the Mormon Church leaders some concern, for they fear that their people will find out about them."[12]

In the last two decades, digitalization of the texts has allowed a much more nuanced analysis of the words and word substitutions by a team of scholars in the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project lead by BYU professor Royal Skousen.[13] When he was asked, "How many changes are there in the Book of Mormon text?" Skousen replied:

> I don't know for sure, and I'll tell you why it's hard to count them. In my computerized collation of the two manuscripts and 20 significant editions of the Book of Mormon, I can count the number of places of variation. These are places where there's a textual variant. The variant itself can involve spelling, punctuation, words missing or added, a grammatical change, and so on. In all, there are about 105,000 places of variation in the computerized collation.[14]

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10. Lamoni Call, *2000 Changes in the Book of Mormon* (Bountiful, UT: L. Call, 1898), 41, https://archive.org/details/2000changesinboo00callrich.

11. See Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mean & Co, 1902), 95, https://archive.org/details/foundermormonism00rilerich.

12. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon*, rev. ed, (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1996), 15.

13. See Royal Skousen, "Online Access to the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project," The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, accessed August 15, 2017, http://criticaltext.byustudies.byu.edu/.

14. Royal Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 161–62, http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/changes-in-the-book-of-mormon/. See also Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text*

It appears that early critics Lamoni Call and Jerald Tanner underestimated the number of changes that could be identified in the various versions of the Book of Mormon when compared to the original copy penned by Joseph Smith's scribes.

Claiming That the Book of Mormon Dictation Must be Flawless

For some observers, the fact that any changes have been made in the original Book of Mormon text is evidence of the falseness of the book.[15] This argument assumes Joseph Smith simply read the English text of the Reformed Egyptian engravings as it flashed upon the seer stone. Several recollections support this interpretation. Martin Harris reported, "By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin."[16] David Whitmer recalled similarly: "The Seer Stone … was placed in the crown of a hat, into which Joseph put his face, so as to exclude the external light. Then, a spiritual light would shine forth, and parchment would appear before Joseph, upon which was a line of characters from the plates, and under it, the translation in English."[17]

Assuming God (through the seer stone) was responsible for every word in the Book of Mormon, Lamoni Call lamented, "God's way may not be as man's ways, but so far as the writer is concerned, he would have had more faith in the work if it had been 'correct in every particular,' a model of simplicity in English, and not need more than 3,000 amendments to make it passable among even scrub English scholars. … We do not claim that this proves the Book of Mormon untrue, but we do think it goes a long way toward it."[18]

Floyd C. McElveen, author of *The Mormon Illusion*, further explains:

> Joseph Smith declared that God gave him the power to translate the reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics into English

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of the Book of Mormon: Part One Grammatical Variation (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2016) 11.

15.   See Tanner, *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon*, http://www.utlm.org/onlinebooks/3913intro.htm. See also "Book of Mormon Problems," MormonThink, accessed November 27, 2017, http://www.mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm.

16.   Edward Stevenson, "One of the Three Witnesses: Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, 6 February 1882, 86–87.

17.   L. Traughber Jr., "Testimony of David Whitmer," *Saints' Herald* 26, no. 22 (November 15, 1879), http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/IL/sain1872.htm#111579.

18.   Call, *2000 Changes in the Book of Mormon*, 30, 128.

and produce the *Book of Mormon*. … This means that every letter, every character, was exactly what God said, letter-by-letter and word-for-word. … The written word was perfect.[19]

McElveen then asks, "If the translated word were perfect, why have the Mormons made some 4,000 changes in grammar, punctuation and word structure in the perfect *Book of Mormon*?"[20] He declares, "If the Mormons claim that God directed Joseph Smith in translating the *Book of Mormon* they accuse God of using faulty grammar and of making other mistakes that later needed to be corrected."[21]

The problem with these criticisms is that they are based upon a false premise. Although Martin Harris and David Whitmer were positioned to observe, they did not personally translate and could describe only what they saw and heard. Their narratives depict the seer stone as little more than a teleprompter and relegate Joseph Smith's participation to that of a *reader* devoid of any role as *translator*. In contrast, Oliver Cowdery did attempt to translate (D&C 8, 9). He consistently described Joseph looking into the seer stone(s) "to translate," not to *read* "what was on the plates."[22] Oliver's accounts do not portray Joseph simply reciting words scrolling across the seer stone(s).[23]

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19. Floyd C. McElveen, *The Mormon Illusion: What the Bible Says About the Latter-day Saints* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1979) 44–45.

20. Ibid., 46.

21. Ibid., 48.

22. Josiah Jones, "History of the Mormonites," *The Evangelist* 9 (June 1, 1841): 132–34, accessed November 27, 2017, http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/JJones.html. See also "Last Days of Oliver Cowdery," *Deseret News*, (Salt Lake City, UT), April 13, 1859, https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2590800. See also Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, September 7, 1834 in *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 14–15, http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/7160.

23. See John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Press/Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 157–62. One possible exception is found in a late 1907 recollection from conversations between Samuel W. Richards and Oliver Cowdery in the "fall of 1848." Richards wrote that "by holding the translators over the words of the written record, and the translation appears distinctly in the instrument. … Every word was made distinctly visible even to every letter." (Samuel W. Richards [statement, May 21, 1907] 2–3, https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE4987076.) Eyewitnesses testified differently saying that a seer stone, rather than the "translators," was used and the plates were not involved. Perhaps, Richards' somewhat garbled report was actually referring to proper names consistently spelled out rather than all 269,938 words of the 1830 Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith left no description of how the words came to him as he dictated. At a Church conference in 1831, Hyrum Smith invited the Prophet to explain how the Book of Mormon came forth. Joseph's response was that "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and … it was not expedient for him to relate these things."[24] His only answer was that it came "by the gift and power of God."[25]

That Joseph contributed to the process in an undefined but necessary way was demonstrated in 1829 when Oliver Cowdery attempted to translate but failed. The Lord explained why: "Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask." (D&C 9:7–8). It appears that translating involved more than mimicking a court recorder reading back previous testimony.

Joseph's revelations describe the Book of Mormon as containing "the truth and word of God" (D&C 19:26) but not necessarily words from God's own mouth. It is true that Joseph Smith said "the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth," but the context was not in grammatical accuracy, rather in its power to teach truth. He went on to say that "a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book." [26]

According to the book's own history, the text was not perfect when recorded by Mormon and Moroni[27] or when dictated by Joseph to his

24. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 23.

25. "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]", The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 27, 2017, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/431. See also *Times and Seasons* 5 (1 March 1842): 707, accessed November 27, 2017, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-march-1842/5. See also "Testimony of Three Witnesses," *Book of Mormon*, (Palmyra, NY: E. B. Grandin, 1830), 589.

26. Kenney, ed. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898,* 2:139. This comment was made by Joseph Smith, Sunday, November 28, 1841, at Brigham Young's home, with the Apostles present.

27.   See Mormon 9:31. Moroni explained, "If there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God" (Book of Mormon, title page).

scribes.[28] Expecting the text to be perfect and then claiming God made mistakes because of subsequent changes is a straw man argument because the original expectation is not representative of Joseph's teachings.

Understanding the "Changes" and "Variants"

The Book of Mormon is "a literary feat for the ages," writes Huffington Post blogger Jack Kelly. That Joseph Smith "dictated most of it in a period of less than three months and did not revise a single word before its initial printing is even more jaw-dropping."[29] So Joseph did not revise the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon before it went to print, but as Lamoni Call and the Tanners have documented, changes were made in subsequent printings.

If numerous revisions, rewritings, edits, and modifications were needed in a second edition, then the question is why? Did the original Book of Mormon manuscript contain many errors that needed correction like the early draft of most books that are eventually printed? If so, its creation might not have required divine intervention or have been significantly different from other publications. But if the changes constituted minor letter and word substitutions to upgrade the dialect and grammar without changing the primary story line or message, then Joseph's creation would retain an important uniqueness.

Royal Skousen has recently published "all of the cases of grammatical variation in the history of the Book of Mormon text."[30] His study identifies 106,508 "accidentals" in the different versions of the Book of Mormon.[31]

Skousen's research supports that none of the general categories of changes indicates the presence of glaring problems within the Book of Mormon narrative.

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28. Dan Vogel wrote, "Smith may have sometimes made stylistic changes in the manuscript and passed them off as scribal errors." (Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 124, http://signaturebookslibrary.org/joseph-smith-the-making-of-a-prophet/.) This is purely speculative. See Royal Skousen ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001).

29. Jack Kelley, "Joseph Smith: Genius," *The Blog, Huffington Post,* December 06, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/thought-matters/joseph-smith-genius_b_10773964.html.

30. Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part One Grammatical Variation*, 11.

31. Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," 174.

Category of Change	Number
Adding the word *change*	273
Adding chapter and verse numbers	9,677
Paragraphing	1,420
Punctuation	41,619
Periods for numbers	6,620
Spelling ampersands	15,577
Spelling of etc.	18
Spelling of common English words	7,982
Scribal slips in manuscripts	1,780
Typos in editions	2,087
Capitalization	19,455
	106,508

Early Modern English

While some of the textual modifications in the chart above are easy to comprehend, the sheer number of changes raises questions of why, if God was involved with the translation process, are there are so many? Recent research by Skousen and Stanford Carmack provides important clues. "In quite a few cases," writes Skousen, "the Book of Mormon usage is restricted to Early Modern English and died out by the 1700s. One surprising finding is that nearly all the Book of Mormon usage that many have thought to be simply Joseph Smith's Upstate New York dialect has actually been identified as Early Modern English. In other words, the original Book of Mormon text is archaic English (dating from Early Modern English) rather than Joseph Smith's dialectal English."[32]

Word substitutions comprised a large part of the transition from old English to a newer version. "The most prominent of these changes has been to replace *which* with *who* (or *whom* or *that*) when it refers to people. … Similarly, *because that* was changed in the 1837 edition to simply *because*. Further, instances of the historical present tense have been removed from the Book of Mormon, such as the many instances of original *saith* rather than *said*."[33] It could be argued that the primary

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32. Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part One Grammatical Variation*, 13.

33. Royal Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, vol. 11, 2014, 167.

driving force through all the textual alterations was improving the readability and clarity of the message of the Book of Mormon.

Stanford Carmack, who has a linguistics and law degree from Stanford University, sums up the most recent findings:

> When Book of Mormon language deviates from biblical modes of expression, it is easy to view these differences as nonstandard, even ungrammatical. And from the perspective of modern English, the earliest text of the Book of Mormon certainly often reads that way. But because much of its language is independent of the King James Bible, even reaching back in time to the transition period from late Middle English into Early Modern English, it needs to be compared broadly to those earlier stages of English. … [I]t is no longer possible to argue that the earliest text of the Book of Mormon is defective and substandard in its grammar.[34]

Carmack continues, "We need to disabuse ourselves of the idea that the Book of Mormon is full of 'errors of grammar and diction' and appreciate the text for what is is — a richly embroidered linguistic work that demonstrates natural language variation appropriately and whose forms and patterns of use are strikingly like those found in the Early Modern English period."[35]

The reasons why the seer stone would have produced a text in an earlier form of English is impossible to answer given our current state of knowledge. Without more information regarding God's involvement with the process, declaring definitively that an acceptable text would have been in pure King James English, or in nineteenth century English, or in twenty-first century English, is simply impossible.

It might be argued that since the original dialect came through the seer stone, it should remain unchanged and not be updated. Skousen explains that "keeping the original, nonstandard language in the current

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34.   Stanford Carmack, "The Nature of the Nonstandard English in the Book of Mormon," quoted in Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part One Grammatical Variation*, 95. See also, Stanford Carmack, "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11, (2014): 209–62, http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-look-at-some-nonstandard-book-of-mormon-grammar/.

35.   Ibid, 95.

text would only bring attention to itself and get in the way of reading the book for its message."[36]

Critics Identify the Most Egregious Changes

Several critical authors have provided samples of changes that they apparently consider to be the most egregious.[37] In 2006, Jerald and Sandra Tanner wrote, "Besides the approximately 4,000 [3,913] grammatical and spelling changes that have been made in the Book of Mormon, there have been both historical changes and doctrinal changes."[38] What "historical and doctrinal" changes did they immediately mention? They highlighted two.

In the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon Joseph Smith replaced the name *Benjamin* with *Mosiah* in Mosiah 21:28 and Ether 4:1.

Concerning these word substitutions, Skousen explains, "The problem has to do with how the chronology is interpreted in the books of Mosiah. The two original readings with *Benjamin* are very likely correct. Although *Benjamin* is unexpected, it appears that king Benjamin lived long enough to be still alive when Ammon and his men returned to Zarahemla with the people of king Limhi (in Mosiah 22).[39]

More recently Don Bradley has pointed out that king Benjamin's father — also named Mosiah — translated a "large stone brought unto him with engravings" by using "the gift and power of God" (Omni, 1:20). Bradley's research into the lost 116 pages indicates the elder Mosiah actually found the interpreters (later called Urim and Thummim), which were passed to Benjamin and then to his son Mosiah.[40] If correct, then

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36.   Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part One Grammatical Variation*, 11.

37.   See Earl M. Wunderli,<*An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us About Itself* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 9, 30, 32, 202. Wunderli also mentioned changing "Jesus Christ" to "Messiah" in 1 Nephi 12:18 (46n88). See also "Book of Mormon Problems," Mormon Think, accessed November 18, 2017, http://www.mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm.

38.   Jerald and Sandra Tanner, "The Challenge the Book of Mormon Makes to the World," *Salt Lake Messenger* 107, (October 2006), http://www.utlm.org/newsletters/no107.htm.

39.   Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," 171.

40.   Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Rediscovering the Book of Lehi* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books), forthcoming.

	1830 Edition	**1867 Edition**
Mosiah 21:28	And now Limhi was again filled with joy on learning from the mouth of Ammon that king <u>Benjamin</u> had a gift from God, whereby he could interpret such engravings; yea, and Ammon also did rejoice.	And now Limhi was again filled with joy on learning from the mouth of Ammon that king <u>Mosiah</u> had a gift from God, whereby he could interpret such engravings; yea, and Ammon also did rejoice
Ether 4:1	And the Lord commanded the brother of Jared to go down out of the mount from the presence of the Lord, and write the things which he had seen: and they were forbidden to come unto the children of men, until after that he should be lifted up upon the cross: and for this cause did king <u>Benjamin</u> keep them, that they should not come unto the world until after Christ should shew himself unto his people.	And the Lord commanded the brother of Jared to go down out of the mount from the presence of the Lord, and write the things which he had seen; and they were forbidden to come unto the children of men until after that he should be lifted up upon the cross; and for this cause did king <u>Mosiah</u> keep them, that they should not come unto the world until after Christ should show himself unto his people.

all three names could be accurately substituted in the Ether reference and the latter two names in the Mosiah verse. Within the context of the Book of Mormon narrative, this substitution seems insignificant.

The other change the Tanners discuss involves the addition of "the son of" to four original verses (now 1 Nephi 11:18, 21, 32, 13:40) to clarify Christ was the son of God. They consider these four substitutions as "the four most important changes" in the Book of Mormon.[41]

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41. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Major Problems of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1989), 160.

	1830 Edition	**1837 Edition**
1 Nephi 11:18	"And he said unto me, Behold, the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh	"And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of **the Son of** God, after the manner of the flesh."
1 Nephi 11:21	"And the angel said unto me, behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father! …"	"And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even **the Son of** the Eternal Father! …"
1 Nephi 11:32	"… And I looked and beheld the Lamb of God, that he was taken by the people; yea, the Everlasting God, was judged of the world …"	"… And I looked and beheld the Lamb of God, that he was taken by the people; yea, **the Son of** the everlasting God was judged of the world …"
1 Nephi 13:40	"… and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Savior of the world …"	"… and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people that the Lamb of God is **the Son of** the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the World …"

In Joseph's early teachings, Christ was both God and the son of God, so either rendition was accurate.[42] It could be reasoned that this highlighted change did not alter any doctrine or teaching, but the additional words served to more clearly distinguish the teaching from Trinitarian views popular in other religious traditions. Skousen speculates, "Perhaps he didn't like the Catholic sounding expression" and that the addition was simply a "clarification."[43]

It appears that of all the possibilities, these two emendations were the most significant changes the Tanners could identify. If more important historical or doctrinal alterations had been encountered in their research, it is probable those would have been mentioned first.

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42. See D&C 6:2, 37; 76:22–23.
43. Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," 169.

The significance of all the changes will likely remain controversial, but a couple of observations can be made. First, these two do not seem to represent an attempt to correct sweeping contradictions or blunders in the text but rather provide clarification to potential ambiguities. Second, if these are the most egregious changes critics can identify, the Book of Mormon narrative, as it fell from Joseph's lips, was remarkably free from significant errors.

Book of Mormon Changes Do Not Represent Revising or Rewriting

As discussed above, the changes identified by Skousen and Carmack do not refer to major modifications or corrections to sections of the Book of Mormon's original wording. Historian Dan Vogel acknowledged, "Smith's method of dictation did not allow for rewriting. It was a more-or-less stream-of-consciousness composition," adding, "It is not that the manuscript went through a major rewrite."[44] Normal content editing, which involves revising and reworking parts of the text, did not occur in the original or in subsequent editions of the Book of Mormon.

Many naturalists consider Joseph Smith to have been a first-time novelist in 1829 as he created the Book of Mormon, so the lack of revisions is unexpected.[45] Professional writers and instructors generally emphasize the need for rewriting in order to create a finished manuscript. Betty Mattix Dietsch, author of *Reasoning & Writing Well*, addresses the plight of first-time novelists: "Some inexperienced writers seem to think they have hit the jackpot on their first draft. They evade the fact that every exploratory draft needs more work."[46] "I usually write about ten more or less complete drafts" confides Pulitzer Prize winner Tracy Kidder, "each one usually though not always closer to the final thing."[47] In her college

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44. Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, xix, 383.

45. A few of the writers who have published books that portray Joseph Smith as the unassisted author of the Book of Mormon include: David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2000); Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004); Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith's Plagiarism of the Bible in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 2010); Earl M. Wunderli, *An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us About Itself* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013).

46. Betty Mattix Dietsch, *Reasoning & Writing Well: A Rhetoric, Research Guide, Reader, and Handbook*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 62.

47. Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd, *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction* (New York: Random House, 2013), 147.

textbook, *Steps to Writing Well*, Jean Wyrick emphasizes the importance of rewriting:

> The absolute necessity of revision cannot be overemphasized. All good writers rethink, rearrange, and rewrite large portions of their prose. … Revision is a *thinking process* that occurs any time you are working on a writing project. It means looking at your writing with a "fresh eye"—that is, reseeing your writing in ways that will enable you to make more effective choices throughout your essay. … Revision means making important decisions about the best ways to focus, organize, develop, clarify, and emphasize your ideas. … Virtually all writers revise after "reseeing" a draft in its entirety.[48]

Louis Brandeis, who served as an associate justice on the Supreme Court of the United States from 1916 to 1939, coined a common maxim for authors: "There is no good writing; there is only good rewriting." That changes have been made in the Book of Mormon text should not be confused with the idea that *revisions* or rewriting occurred. They did not, which is surprising for a frontier-schooled twenty-three-year-old farm boy who is listed as "author."[49]

Potential Propaganda

A review of critical literature regarding the Book of Mormon identifies two classes of critics. There are those who tell their audiences that many changes have been made and provide examples (like the Tanners). There are others who report "upwards of 4,000" changes without any further discussion.[50]

On the surface, voices that stress the thousands of emendations could easily generate a mental picture of a book that underwent significant revisions and rewriting after its first edition. If the overall insignificance of the changes is not disclosed, the number of 2,000 or 3,913 changes

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48.   Jean Wyrick, *Steps to Writing Well*, 12th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 91–92.

49.   See William Davis, "Reassessing Joseph Smith Jr.'s Formal Education," *Dialogue*, (Winter 2016): 1–58. Davis concluded that Joseph Smith may have had seven years of schooling. However, Davis's methodology is problematic, and his research fails to take into account contemporaneous sources that contradict his conclusions. See also Brian C. Hales, "Curiously Unique: Joseph Smith as 'Author' of the Book of Mormon," forthcoming.

50.   David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2000), 86.

could be used by critics to mislead their audiences, as propaganda is designed to do.

Jerald and Sandra Tanners have sold many copies of their book *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon*, since first released in 1965. The title of the book is technically accurate. But how many unsuspecting observers have read (and continue to read) the title and assume the Book of Mormon manuscript required thousands of corrections to compensate for significant mistakes in Joseph Smith's dictation? The perception created by the title might be misleading because readers may impute more significance to the word "changes" than actually justified. If transparency is sought, then adding a subtitle might be useful: *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon: But None are Really Significant*.

Royal Skousen summarized his research: "Errors have crept into the text, but no errors significantly interfere with either the message of the book or its doctrine. … Ultimately, all of this worry over the number of changes is specious."[51]

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51.   Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," 172.