A CRITICAL
An Interview with Royal Skousen

Conducted between Royal Skousen and his friend and colleague Dan Peterson regarding the Book of Mormon critical text project to which Skousen has dedicated his career.

What is a critical text of the Book of Mormon? In fact, what is a critical text?

A critical text provides, first of all, the original text of a work, to the extent it can be determined. Then there is what is called an apparatus printed either on each page or at the end of the work that gives in a succinct way a description of the history of that text, namely, how the original text has changed over time and when and who made the changes.

Why is there a need for a critical text, especially of the Book of Mormon since Joseph Smith declared he dictated it "by the gift and power of God"?

Many readers of the Book of Mormon assume that the modern printed edition contains the same text that Joseph Smith originally dictated to his scribes in 1828–29, but in fact even the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon ended up with a considerable number of changes, including ones that entered the text during its dictation. More changes were made when the scribes transcribed the printer’s manuscript from the original manuscript; and finally there were changes the typesetter introduced into the text when he set the type for the 1830 edition. And subsequent editions have continued to make changes in the text, including a considerable number of grammatical emendations that have attempted to eliminate the nonstandard English from the original text of the Book of Mormon. All these layers of change have resulted in a very complex text, one that has led to a massive scholarly project.
In case after case, the original reading makes the actual doctrine come through better, or it makes the historical account more accurate or consistent.

Was the original goal of the critical text project to do all this kind of analysis, or was it simpler and more narrowly defined?
The original goal of this project was to make detailed transcripts of the two manuscripts of the Book of Mormon, the original manuscript and the printer’s manuscript, and then to publish those transcripts since prior to this project there had never been any published transcripts of either manuscript. The original manuscript (O) is the manuscript the scribes wrote down as Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon, initially in 1828 (including the first 116 pages, which were lost, and the beginning portion of the book of Mosiah) and then in 1829 (basically, the Book of Mormon as we have it today). Oliver Cowdery was the main scribe. Joseph placed this manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House in October 1841; 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. The printer’s manuscript (P) is a copy of O that the scribes made and took to E. B. Grandin’s print shop in Palmyra for the printing of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Their copywork took time, from August 1829 through January 1830. Again, Oliver Cowdery was the main scribe. This copy—but what a copy!—is extant except for three lines of text from the bottom of the first leaf. P was earlier owned by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now the Community of Christ), but P is now owned by our Church.

So when did you start doing the transcriptions?
In the summer of 1988, more than 30 years ago, my colleague John W. Welch arranged for me to get on loan a set of clear photographs for both manuscripts: black-and-white photographs of O taken in ultraviolet light and a large photocopy of P. From these photographs, I was able to make my initial transcripts, then check them against the actual manuscripts, including newly discovered fragments of O held by the Wilford Wood family that accounted for 2% of the original text.

And have these transcriptions been published?
Yes, after 13 years of work my complete transcripts of O and P were published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and BYU in 2001. I was also able to publish a few photographs of each manuscript. There are two volumes: Volume 1 covers O, while Volume 2 covers P and was published in two parts.

Are there plans to publish the transcriptions with all the photographs?
Yes, this second step is being done as part of the publications of the Joseph Smith Papers (JSP). In fact, my transcript of P along with color photographs of P was published by the JSP in 2015, again in two parts. For each individual manuscript page, the JSP volume presents the photograph on the left and my transcript on the right. Our plan is to do the same for O.

So what is the status of publishing the photographs of the original manuscript?
It’s going to take a lot more time to produce the JSP volume for O. The damaged manuscript is being photographed using multispectral imaging, and then for each leaf of O all the photographs for the individual fragments (“the puzzle pieces”) will have to be put together to produce a composite photograph to go alongside the transcript. It is
But isn’t it true that the critical text has become much more than publishing photographs and transcripts?

Yes, and that happened right from the beginning of my work on the transcripts. By August 1988, I had discovered about two dozen differences in the original manuscript, from 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi alone, differences that had never been noticed before and had never appeared in the Church’s editions of the Book of Mormon.

Can you give some examples?

Here are three that were published early on (in the Winter 1990 issue of BYU Studies); each represents an error that Oliver Cowdery made when he copied the text from O into P:

1 Nephi 8:31 “and he also saw other multitudes pressing (O) > feeling (P) their way towards that great and spacious building”

1 Nephi 22:8 “it is likened unto the being nursed (O) > nourished (P) by the Gentiles”

2 Nephi 1:5 “yea the Lord hath consecrated (O) > covenanted (P) this land unto me”

The current standard texts have the secondary readings. These mistakes work, in a sense; that’s why they’ve remained in the text. But they are contradicted by usage elsewhere in the text. The original readings are clearly superior.

So how many changes have you found overall?

In the published critical text of the Book of Mormon, I identify 612 new readings that have never appeared in any standard edition of the Book of Mormon (this includes RLDS editions as well as LDS editions). All of these new readings come from the manuscripts or by conjectural emendation:

216 readings are found only in O
   In each of these cases, the scribe incorrectly copied the text from O into P.

188 readings are found only in P
   O is no longer extant or it contains an impossible reading (an obvious primitive error); the typesetter changed the original reading when he set the type for the 1830 edition.

88 readings in both O and P
   The 1830 typesetter changed the original reading when he set the type for the 1830 edition.

2 readings in copies of the title page
   Multiple copies of the Book of Mormon title page were made; these provide additional support for the original reading.

118 conjectural emendations

But how many of these changes really make a difference in meaning?

Another way to ask this question is: How many of these would show up as differences in translations of the Book of Mormon into foreign languages? Of the 612, it turns out that 246 of them would require change in a word or a phrase. This is true for the three example changes listed earlier from 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi.

Can you give us an example of a conjectural emendation that you have accepted?

In 1 Nephi 7:5, the original manuscript has an impossible reading: “the Lord did soften the heart of Ishmael and also his hole hole.” Some kind of conjectural emendation is required here. Oliver Cowdery, when he copied the text from O into P, interpreted hole hole as a mistake for household, thus P reads “the Lord did soften the heart of Ishmael and also his household.” Based on usage elsewhere in the text and considering what could have caused the scribe of O to write hole hole, I have proposed that the original reading was “the Lord did soften the heart of Ishmael and also his whole household” (here whole stands for the first hole and the hold in household stands for the second hole).

You have 118 new conjectural emendations in the text. Isn’t that quite a lot?

Actually, one might think so, but it’s really quite conservative. 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 when he set the type. 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. Conjectural emendations are not at all rare in the history of the text. In fact, the current LDS text has a total of 654 conjectural emendations, while the critical text has only about half that many, 354; yet both texts agree in having 187 of the same conjectures.

So where can we find all these original readings for the Book of Mormon?


But going beyond the list, where can we find the arguments for (and against) these changes in the text?

They are all published in Volume 4 of the critical text, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, which is composed of six large maroon books. The first edition was published one book per year over a period of six years, from 2004 through 2009, with a total of 4,060 pages, and is now freely available online from the Interpreter Foundation or from Book of Mormon Central. A second, corrected edition of Volume 4, again in six books but now with 4,106 pages, was printed in 2017.

Okay, so that’s Volume 4. But you’ve skipped Volume 3! What’s in Volume 3?

Volume 3 is called The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon, and when completed it’s going to contain 8 parts (that is, eight books). Thus far the first 4 parts have been published, with 2 more parts to be published in the next few months, and the last 2 parts by 2021. These books range from 450 to 700 pages long, and each is bound in forest green, to distinguish them from the other books in the project.
That’s a lot of writing. So what’s in these 8 parts?

The first 2 parts are called Grammatical Variation. They form a set and comprise 1,273 pages in which I discuss all the bad grammar in the original text of the Book of Mormon. This nonstandard grammar has been largely removed from our current text. These two books describe in detail all the grammatical editing that the Book of Mormon has undergone.

What are some examples of this nonstandard English?
Here are two notorious examples: (1) “they was angry with me” (Alma 9:31), which was emended to “they were angry with me” by Joseph Smith in his editing for the second edition of the Book of Mormon (published in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1837); (2) “in them days” (Helaman 7:8), which was first emended to “in those days” in the 1906 large-print edition (published in Salt Lake City).

Haven’t people always thought this nonstandard English simply represented Joseph Smith’s dialect?
Yes, right from the beginning this has been the opinion of both members and nonmembers who read the book. But in 2014 Stanford Carmack, now my research colleague, proposed that this bad grammar was actually acceptable language usage that dated from Early Modern English, that it could be found in scholarly writing printed in the 1500s and 1600s. In fact,
With sense-lines, each line of text is a coherent phrase or clause.

In *Grammatical Variation* we show for each case of nonstandard English that examples of its usage can be found in Early Modern English texts. This finding vindicates my decision to restore the nonstandard English in the Yale edition of the Book of Mormon, despite the fact that the normal reader will misunderstand it as simply bad English.

Is there anything else striking about the Yale edition?

I published the text using sense-lines. With sense-lines, each line of text is a coherent phrase or clause. It looks like poetry to most readers, but this is not its function. First of all, readers have found the sense-line format much easier to read. Traditional formats make it hard for the reader, whether it is set in paragraphs (as with the original 1830 edition) or in two narrow columns with numbered paragraphs for the verses (the LDS text since 1920). The latter follows the traditional format dating from 1560 of publishing the English Bible in two columns and verse paragraphs. This format is helpful in finding passages for citation, yet it is extremely awkward for actually reading the text. But there is a second aspect to the use of sense-lines: it replicates how Joseph Smith would have dictated the text to his scribes. It would have been in sense-lines, with him pausing at the end of phrases and short clauses for the scribe to keep up with him, but he would not have dictated full sentences unless they were short—and definitely not whole paragraphs without breaking them up. So reading the Yale edition out loud, we get a sense of how listeners would have heard the Book of Mormon as Joseph Smith originally dictated it.

Returning to Volume 3 of the critical text: What comes after *Grammatical Variation*?

It’s called *The Nature of the Original Language*. It was published just last year as parts 3 and 4, again with the collaboration of Stanford Carmack.

“The nature of the original language” . . . of what original language?

It’s about the English language that the Book of Mormon was originally translated into. And as with *Grammatical Variation*, we have found that in general the English language of the Book of Mormon appears to be based on Early Modern English. In the late 1990s, a research assistant of mine, Renee Bangerter, made an important discovery: a number of words, in order to make sense of how they are used in the Book of Mormon, had meanings that were dating from the 1500s and 1600s, not from the early 1800s. Bangerter published her surprising findings in her MA thesis in 1998, but it was not until 2003 that I started to concentrate on extending her results to all the words in the text of the Book of Mormon. And in 2014 Stanford Carmack began to assist me in this research by concentrating on the syntax (the sentence structure) of the Book of Mormon. Our basic finding in *The Nature of the Original Language* is that the meanings of the words in the English translation of the Book of Mormon date from the 1530s up through the 1730s, at least a hundred years before Joseph Smith dictated the text of the book to his scribes.

Yet the words and phrases in the original text don’t seem to have these old meanings, do they?

Normally, we readers of the book try to interpret the strange word uses according to their current meanings, which doesn’t always work. As I studied these cases (and later with the help of Stanford Carmack), I began to identify example after example in the original text of archaic vocabulary, phrases, grammar, expressions, and syntax. Our findings are all listed in the first part of *The Nature of the Original Language*; here I give an example of each type:

**ARCHAIC VOCABULARY**

39 lexical items with meanings no longer in use

Alma 52:19 “that they might *flatter* them out of their strong holds”

Here *flatter* means ‘to coax or entice’ and that word is still in the text.

**ARCHAIC PHRASES**

25 phrases no longer in use

Mosiah 3:19 “*but if* ye yieldeth to the enticings of the Holy Spirit”

The conjunctive phrase *but if* originally meant ‘unless’; this was emended to *unless* by James E. Talmage in the 1920 edition.

**ARCHAIC GRAMMAR**

13 grammatical forms no longer in use

Alma 12:31 “to act according to their *wills and pleasures*”

This unusual plural construction is still in the text.

**ARCHAIC EXPRESSIONS**

3 expressions no longer in use

3 Nephi 19:26 “*never the less* they did not cease to pray”

This phrase, *never the less*, originally meant ‘not in any way less’, but has always been set in the text as a single word, *nevertheless*, despite its contradiction with Jesus’s preceding words: “and Jesus saith unto them: pray on”.

**ARCHAIC SYNTAX**

4 syntactic constructions no longer in use

3 Nephi 29:4 “he will *cause it that it* shall soon overtake you”

This complex complement construction for the verb *cause* has never been emended to the infinitival expression expected in modern English: “he will *cause it to* soon overtake you”.

So why was the Book of Mormon translated into the language of Early Modern English and not Joseph Smith’s own English?

We don’t know the answer to this question, although there has been a lot of speculation. The evidence, in my opinion, is overwhelming that the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon has this
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archaic nature. I’m willing to wait for the Lord to give us an explanation. In the meantime, I view it as my job to study the text, to analyze the original language in all of its aspects, and to describe it accurately. It is a complex endeavor.

So what’s going to be in part 5 that will be published this fall?
It’s called The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon, with 440 pages. It will analyze the use of the King James Bible in the Book of Mormon and will list 36 literal quotations as well as numerous examples of paraphrastic quotations, biblical expressions, and passages where King James phraseology has been woven into the text of the Book of Mormon. The use of the King James Bible parallels the findings of parts 1–4, namely, that the Book of Mormon is a creative and cultural translation of the Nephite record and its translation is grounded in the 1500s and 1600s.

And what about part 6?
It’s going to be published shortly after part 5, probably at the beginning of the new year (2020). Its subject matter dates from Joseph Smith’s time, namely, the spellings in the two manuscripts and in the printed editions.

What can English spelling tell us about the Book of Mormon?
First of all, part 6 will reverse the common belief among LDS people that spelling had not yet been standardized when the 1830 edition was published. Although in the early 1800s individuals showed great variety in spelling in their own writing, typesetters had been using an informally agreed upon spelling standard for English, one that dated from the mid-1700s. John Gilbert, the typesetter for the 1830 edition, set the type for that edition using standardized spellings, not Oliver Cowdery’s misspellings. In part 6, I will also measure the error rate in spelling for John Gilbert as well as Oliver Cowdery and the other Book of Mormon scribes: John and Christian Whitmer, Martin Harris, and Hyrum Smith. Oliver Cowdery deserves his reputation as an excellent scribe. Although he was a second-rate speller, he made relatively few scribal slips. We can also show that his spelling improved as he proofed the 1830 typeset sheets against his manuscript copy; unlike the other scribes, he was learning how to spell better as the 1830 Book of Mormon was being printed.

And what about those two final parts, to be published by 2021?
These two parts are as follows:

part 7: The Transmission of the Text: From the Manuscripts Through the Editions
The first half of part 7 will deal with how the text was transmitted in its earliest stages: from Joseph Smith’s dictation of the text to the scribe writing down his dictation (the original manuscript), then the copying of the text (the printer’s manuscript), and finally the typesetting of the 1830 edition from the two manuscripts. The second half of part 7 will treat the transmission of the text through succeeding editions, from the 1830 edition up to the current editions and will deal with two aspects: (1) how the text has been emended, and (2) how the format for the Book of Mormon has been altered over time and how that has affected our reading of the text.

part 8: Book of Mormon Textual Criticism
In this part, I will deal with how well the principles of textual criticism have held up. There is considerable evidence that in the early transmission of the Book of Mormon text the tendency was to create more difficult readings and shorter readings, which goes against what most textual critics have assumed to be the normal way a text should change over time. I will also deal with the difficult issue of conjectural emendation, and will argue that conjectures occur on a regular basis in the history of a text; it is not a rare occurrence. I will list all of the proposed conjectural emendations and identify those I have accepted. I will also discuss some of the earlier translations of the Book of Mormon (such as the 1852 French edition) and show that in many cases those translators independently came up with some of the conjectures proposed by this project. Finally, I will close this final part with a history of the Book of Mormon critical text project and how it compares with earlier critical text work on the book.

And so that’s it? Anything else?
Yes, one final publication, an electronic one. After all four printed volumes have been published, I will release Volume 5, the computerized collation of the critical text. This collation is a lined-up comparison of the two manuscripts and 20 editions of the Book of Mormon (from 1830 through 1981). The collation will be in a WordCruncher format and
you will be able to look up any word or phrase and see all of its examples and how they’ve changed over time. For instance, you will be able to look up every original instance of “it came to pass” (all 1,399 of them), including the 47 that were removed by Joseph Smith in his editing for the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon. I have been using this electronic collation since the year 2000 as the basis for everything that appears in volumes 3 and 4 of the critical text.

So where can we get copies of the books that have already been published?

The Yale edition, entitled *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, is most readily available on Amazon.com. Volumes 1–2 (now out of print) are superseded by the corresponding volumes being published by the Joseph Smith Papers. Volumes 3 and 4, *The History of the Text* (thus far, the first 6 out of 8 parts) and the second edition of *Analysis of Textual Variants* (all 6 parts, published in 2017) are available from BYU Studies.

And what about your personal testimony of the Book of Mormon? How has all this work, over 30 years, affected your belief in this book?

My testimony of the Book of Mormon is not based on my work on the critical text, but rather on my own personal witness from 40 years ago that this book records events which really happened (even though its English translation, given by the Lord to Joseph Smith, is a cultural and creative one). The Book of Mormon truly is “a marvelous work and a wonder.” Working on this project has continually amazed me since its details have provided explicit textual evidence that the Book of Mormon is indeed a revelation from the Lord and that it was given word for word to Joseph Smith, which he then faithfully dictated to his scribes. We would do well to heed its message.

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