

Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part 3 - Mosiah 17-Alma 20

Royal Skousen



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Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part 3 - Mosiah 17-Alma 20 Royal Skousen Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, the fourth volume in Professor Royal Skousen s ongoing Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, represents the central task of the project: the attempt to recover the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon. Volume 4 considers every significant textual change that has occurred in the English Book of Mormon over the 175 years since Joseph Smith first dictated it to his scribes; it also considers a number of conjectured revisions for specific passages.

Professor Skousen draws on the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, the printer s manuscript prepared by Oliver Cowdery and two other scribes, and 20 significant printed versions ranging from the 1830 edition to the current standard editions published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Community of Christ (formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). Where applicable, he marshals additional evidence of language usage from dialectal and earlier English, as well as data from the King James Bible and the original biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek.

Like its predecessors, part 3 attempts to recover the original text of the Book of Mormon by identifying variations in the text that have been introduced through scribal, typesetting, and editing errors and inconsistencies.

Before Skousen began publishing his findings, readers of the Book of Mormon naturally assumed that unfamiliar or awkward phraseology in the text was due to a strictly literal translation from the ancient source language or to Joseph Smith's language habits and idiosyncrasies. Part 3 of Skousen s Analysis of Textual Variants continues to illuminate such questions. Although the current Book of Mormon does preserve telltale aspects of ancient language (e.g., Hebraisms, chiasmus), the old assumptions of source-language carryover do not hold in every instance. The picture is more complicated. Further, the evidence increasingly supports the theory that the original vocabulary of the Book of Mormon dates from the 1500s and 1600s, not from Joseph Smith s time. That is, the vocabulary agrees with the language of Early Modern English yet is not identical to the vocabulary of the King James Bible.

Part 3 analyzes 898 cases of variation (or potential variation), of which 360 warrant readings that differ from the standard text. Of the latter, 82 have never appeared in any standard printed edition of the Book of Mormon. The original manuscript is extant for only a few pages of this part of the text, so most of the newly proposed changes are found in the printer s manuscript (61 of them, including 3 changes also found in the original manuscript). This part of the text entails a fairly large number of conjectural emendations (21 of them), probably because the original manuscript is generally missing here. However, only 24 of the 360 proposed changes make a difference in meaning that would show up when translating the English text of the Book of Mormon into another language. In addition, 17 changes make the text fully consistent in phraseology or usage, while 5 changes restore a unique phrase or word choice to the text.

Each massive volume in the critical text averages nearly 670 oversize pages of research and analysis that reward careful examination with expanded views of the founding text of Mormonism. In seeking to recover the original English-language text, this ambitious project has identified many variant readings and yielded new insights into the translation process and the systematic nature of the text. These findings will keep

serious students of the Book of Mormon profitably engaged in assessing the ramifications for many years to come.

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