



...let the...
...uniquely for those it became the behavior the father that it should...

Seeking Joseph Smith's Voice



Movie still from *Remembering Nauvoo*. © IRI.

— Kevin L. Barney —

I SUSPECT THAT I WAS INVITED TO PARTICIPATE in reviewing and commenting on the first volume of the commentary phase of Royal Skousen's Book of Mormon critical text project in part because I am in print as having some different views regarding Book of Mormon translation theory than Skousen does. Skousen is on record as preferring what he calls a "tight control" model of the translation, namely, that the English text of the Book of Mormon is a rather literal translation that closely follows its original language exemplar written on the gold plates. In contrast, I prefer what I call "eclecticism," which means that I do not approach the text with a single translation model in mind but remain open as to whether a given passage reflects tighter or looser control, or even midrashic embellishment, on the part of Joseph Smith as the modern translator. Rather than approach the text with an ideological commitment

to how the translation relates to the underlying text in every instance, I prefer to simply follow the evidence as I see it in each particular passage, evidence that sometimes may point in one direction and other times in another. One of the more concrete ramifications of this difference of perspective is that I see Book of Mormon Isaiah variants as tending to revolve around the italicized expressions in the text of the King James Version (KJV), whereas Skousen does not.¹

So if this were a book on underlying Book of Mormon translation theory, I would bring a different point of view to the table. But it is not. Rather, this book is a work of "lower criticism," part of a series dedicated to establishing, to the greatest extent possible, the original English text of the Book of Mormon as it was dictated in 1829. And on that subject, I see very much eye to eye with Skousen. I hope this fundamental agreement is not a disap-



pointment to anyone, but in fact I am a great fan of the critical text project as a whole, and this commentary volume in particular. I think the project has been much needed, well conceived, and rigorously executed. My overarching reaction is to lavish all the praise I can muster for the work Skousen has done and is continuing to do on the Book of Mormon text.

The introduction (pp. 3–24) is both clear and concise.² This is a particular virtue because it allows the reader to quickly and easily get into the meat of the commentary itself. I found that after reading just a few pages of the commentary, I had the methodology down and did not feel the need to constantly refer back to the introduction for an explanation of what Skousen was doing. I did, however, appreciate that the volume came with a bookmark-size card that summarizes the *sigla* used in the commentary; such cards have become an expected convenience to be included with critical texts that make use of numerous symbols. I especially liked how Skousen, after each description, gives a quick and concise synopsis of his reasoning and conclusion as to which reading to accept.

To be a good textual critic requires expertise in the relevant languages. Inasmuch as this project is not trying to look

Royal Skousen's task of analyzing the textual variants of the Book of Mormon required the use of many symbols to succinctly represent key aspects of that complex textual history.

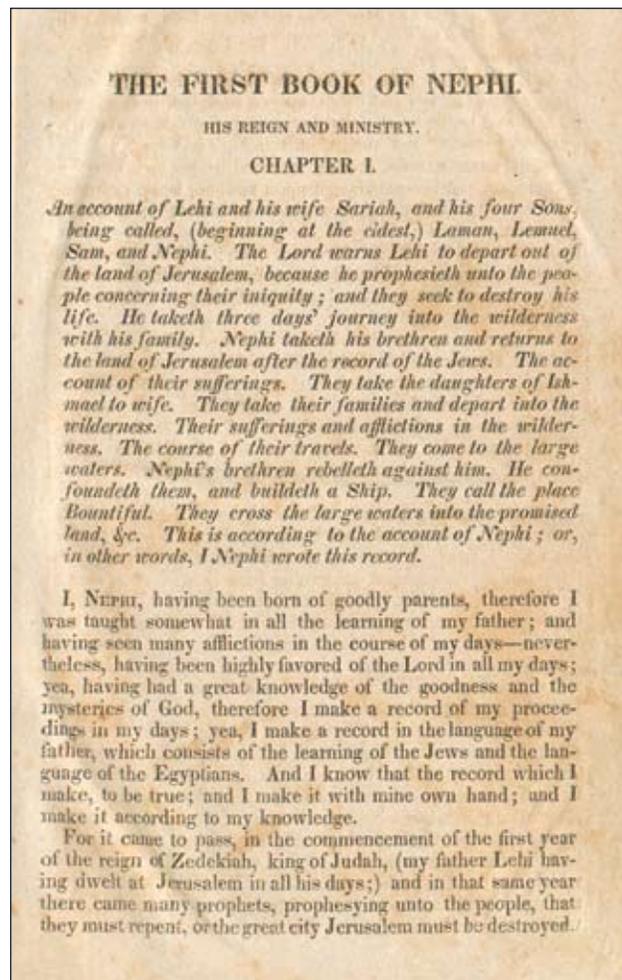
behind the original English text of the Book of Mormon, there is only one relevant language here, and that is English. Skousen is a professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, so he is well equipped for the task. I also thought he employed an appropriately light touch when it came to comments on possible Hebrew influence, generally as mediated through the KJV. A good example of this is in the 1 Nephi preface (pp. 49–50), where he is trying to decide between “they call the place Bountiful” and “they call *the name of* the place Bountiful.” As I began to read that comment, I immediately suspected that the variant “name of the” reflected a common Semitic pleonasm. But Skousen’s assistant, David Calabro, points out that both the pleonastic (as in Genesis 35:15) and nonpleonastic (as in Genesis 35:7)

TEXTUAL SOURCES		
MANUSCRIPTS		
0	☉	the original manuscript
1	☽	the printer's manuscript
EDITIONS		
A	1830	Palmyra, New York
B	1837	Kirtland, Ohio
C	1840	Nauvoo, Illinois
D	1841	Liverpool, England
E	1849	Liverpool, England
F	1852	Liverpool, England
G	1858w	New York City (Wright)
H	1874R	Plano, Illinois (RLDS)
I	1879	Liverpool, England
J	1888	Salt Lake City, Utah
K	1892R	Lamoni, Iowa (RLDS)
L	1902	Kansas City, Missouri
M	1905	Chicago, Illinois
N	1906	Salt Lake City, Utah
O	1907	Salt Lake City, Utah
P	1908R	Lamoni, Iowa (RLDS)
Q	1911	Chicago, Illinois
R	1920	Salt Lake City, Utah
S	1953R	Independence, Missouri (RLDS)
T	1981	Salt Lake City, Utah
EARLY SOURCES FOR THE TITLE PAGE		
0	the original manuscript (not extant here)	
2	copyright certificate, Library of Congress	
3	copyright certificate, LDS Church	
4	typeset title page submitted with source 2	
5	Wayne Sentinel, 26 June 1829	
1	the printer's manuscript	
6	proof sheet for the 1830 edition	
A	1830 edition (Palmyra, New York)	
7	reverse of title page in 1830 edition	
8	Wayne Sentinel, 26 March 1830	
B	1837 edition (Kirtland, Ohio)	
C	1840 edition (Nauvoo, Illinois)	

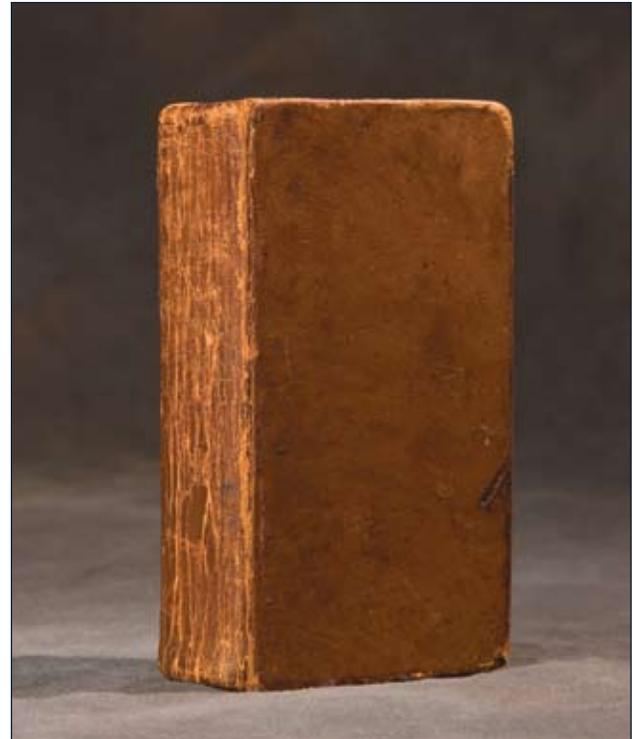
SYMBOLS FOR TEXTUAL VARIANTS	
[x α] β]	variant x for source α null variant for source β
VARIANTS WITHIN A SOURCE	
x > y	change of x to y
NULL > x	addition of x
x > NULL	deletion of x
x / y	ambiguity: either x or y
Ⓐ x > Ⓑ y	scribe A originally wrote x scribe B changed text to y
SCRIBES	
<i>original manuscript</i>	
Ⓐ1	Oliver Cowdery
Ⓐ2	unknown scribe x
Ⓐ3	unknown scribe y
Ⓐ4	Joseph Smith
<i>printer's manuscript</i>	
Ⓑ1	Oliver Cowdery
Ⓑ2	unknown scribe z
Ⓑ3	Hyrum Smith
TYPES OF MANUSCRIPT CHANGES	
<i>same scribe</i>	
>	same ink flow
>+	more ink flow
>−	less ink flow
>%	erasure
>p	in pencil
>b	in blue ink
<i>different scribe</i>	
>jg	John Gilbert, 1830 typesetter
>js	Joseph Smith, editing for 1837 edition
α*	original text in source α
α ^c	corrected text in source α
f	an elongated s in a manuscript
−x	a letter x was inverted when typeset



constructions are attested in Hebrew as reflected in the KJV, so reliance on what appears at first blush to be a Semitic pleonasm is not a safe basis for textual reconstruction. Skousen only occasionally refers to Hebrew usage as possible evidence, and when he does so he does it conservatively, keeping the emphasis where it should properly be: on the English manuscript and versional evidence. He comments on the Hebrew more directly with respect to the Isaiah quotations in 1 Nephi 20–21 and 2 Nephi 7–8, but again, his emphasis is properly on comparing the Book of Mormon text to the English of the King James Bible. I also noted a few places where Skousen could have used the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) as a further control for his position (for instance, in the tendency to modernize the relative



Excerpt from the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon at 1 Nephi 1:1–4. Courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.



1837 edition of the Book of Mormon. Photo by Mark Philbrick.

pronoun *which* when it had a personal antecedent by replacing it with *who* [p. 29]), but Skousen already had an ample supply of more direct evidence and did not really need the further-afield JST evidence to make his case.

Textual criticism often seems counterintuitive to one who is not experienced in it. As I read this commentary, I was pleased to see that Skousen is obviously a fine textual critic who consistently makes appropriate decisions and exercises sound judgment. Some illustrations where Skousen did the right thing, even if it might leave some readers scratching their heads, include the following:

- Skousen often has occasion to apply the principle of *lectio difficilior*, to the effect that, all other things being equal, the more difficult reading is likely to be original. On the surface this seems precisely backward, yet a little thought will reveal that it is a useful principle, for scribes who later worked on a text endeavored to smooth out problems, not create them. An illustration of this is at 1 Nephi 1:3 (pp. 54–55), where Skousen must decide between “and I know that the record which I make *to be true*” in the earliest textual sources and “and I



know that the record which I make *is* true” in the majority of textual sources. He correctly chooses the more difficult reading with the infinitive, not the less jarring reading with the indicative form of the verb. This is the kind of hard decision a textual critic must make.

- Skousen consistently shows a willingness to override Joseph Smith’s own 1837 editing. For instance, as described on page 84, Joseph attempted to edit the expression “in the which” to “in which” by removing the word *the*, succeeding in exactly half of the 56 occurrences of that expression. Skousen rightly returns all of these to the original “in the which.” Similarly, Joseph marked 48 examples of “it came to pass” for deletion in the 1837 edition (p. 207), and Skousen restores them. In 1837 Joseph was modifying the text as an editor, and Skousen properly returns the text to its original, unedited form.
- It may seem incongruous that Skousen restores archaisms and grammatical errors and infelicities, but that is his job as a textual critic. Scribes and editors over time endeavored to modernize and correct the text. So if Skousen wishes to go in the opposite direction toward the original text, he must trend away from the later modernizing and correcting tendencies and toward the earlier archaisms, errors, and infelicities. Skousen’s goal is to re-create the *original* text, not the most correct or some sort of an ideal text. So he restores an apparently plural use of *thou* on page 98, the ungrammatical “against I Nephi” on page 143, and so on. An ideal text might reflect number-verb agreement, such as “they *were* yet wroth,” but a critical text must restore what was no doubt the original (and ungrammatical) “they *was* yet wroth” in 1 Nephi 4:4 (pp. 101–5).

Much of what Skousen discusses in such detail may seem like so many trifles to the casual reader. For instance, on page 113 he begins to spend nearly four pages on distinguishing between *in* and *into*. While such a difference may be immaterial to most readers, to Book of Mormon scholars much can hang on such seemingly trifling distinctions. Skousen’s willingness to go to such lengths to establish the text testifies to the importance the Book of Mormon has achieved as a religious text.

Perhaps the most difficult—and dangerous—terrain for a textual critic to traverse is the conjectural emendation, which is a speculative attempt to solve a textual problem in the absence of hard manuscript evidence. Failure to engage in at least some conjectural emendation is a failure to take the job of textual critic seriously. But engaging in too many flights of whimsical textual fancy is even more problematic. I found that Skousen approaches necessary conjectural emendations with a very appropriate, conservative methodology. To illustrate:

- On pages 137–40, Skousen accepts Oliver Cowdery’s emendation of 1 Nephi 7:1 from “that might raise up seed unto the Lord” in the original manuscript to “that *they* might raise up seed unto the Lord.” The change was made with no textual basis, but Skousen carefully analyzes the evidence and concludes that something like Cowdery’s emendation was almost certainly intended.
- At 1 Nephi 7:5, the original manuscript read “and also his hole,” and the word *hole* was then inserted again above the line, resulting in “and also his hole hole.” When copying the printer’s manuscript, Cowdery interpreted this text as “household.” But again, based on a careful analysis, Skousen brilliantly suggests an even stronger emendation, to “whole household.”
- As important as it is to make sound conjectural emendations, it is equally important to know when to reject an emendation to the text. A good example is at the 1 Nephi preface, discussed on pages 50–52. A correspondent had suggested that, given the shift from third to first person, and for other reasons that may seem cogent on the surface, the *I* in “I Nephi” near the end of the preface should be interpreted as the roman numeral I (in the sense of “first”) rather than the first person singular pronoun. Skousen carefully reviews the situation and rejects this proposed emendation; surely he is correct in this.

I almost invariably agreed with Skousen’s reasoning and conclusions. There were, however, a couple of counterexamples. The first has to do with the attribution of the work at the end of the title page. He rejects the evidence from the earliest sources for “by Joseph Smith Junior author and proprietor” in favor of “translated by Joseph Smith



Junior.” I found his analysis needlessly defensive here. Everyone knows that the “author and proprietor” wording had a copyright background, as he rightly explains. That some anti-Mormons have tried to turn this into an argument that Joseph did not really translate the book is just plain silly. Skousen defends this change on the grounds that the attribution is not part of the original text of the Book of Mormon, which is true, but if he is going to comment on it anyway and make a textual judgment about it, he should still approach it from a sound text-critical perspective. In my view, the wording he prefers is clearly secondary and should not be part of the critical text. Of course, one of the virtues of Skousen’s commentary is that he fully explains the situation, so that even if one disagrees with his ultimate choice, as I do here, one has the information and analysis readily available to form one’s own judgment.

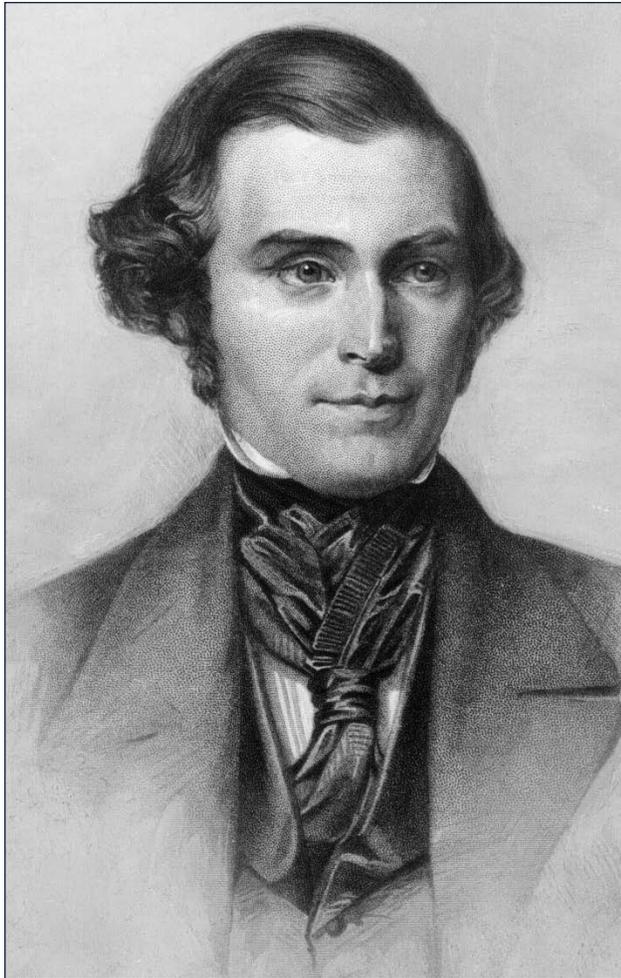
While I anticipate that, for the foreseeable future, Latter-day Saint editions will continue to be based on Orson Pratt’s versification system and Community of Christ editions will not, I would not be at all surprised to see the editions produced by the two groups come closer together in their textual readings as a result of having the solid framework of a well-established critical text that Skousen is in the process of providing.

I also had a minor quibble with his treatment of the *strait* versus *straight* issue beginning on page 174. First, I found it curious that Skousen chose not to cite previous treatments of this issue, including his own in the pages of this journal.³ Second, I thought he relied a little too heavily on the redundancy of “strait and narrow path” as an argument for the nonredundant “straight and narrow path.” If this were simply English literature, the redundancy of the expression would be strong evidence against it; but Hebraic literature tends by its nature

to be formulaic and repetitive.⁴ Skousen notes that in Matthew 7:14, “because *strait* is the *gate*//and *narrow* is the *way*,” the adjectives *strait*//*narrow* are modifying different terms, *gate*//*way*, which is true. But formularity that finds expression in a parallel collocation, such as *strait*//*narrow* does in the Matthew passage, often results in the same terms being used elsewhere in nonparallel juxtapositions as well, such as the syndetic “strait and narrow path” would be.⁵ This is a minor point because I agree with Skousen’s ultimate conclusion, but in my calculus I would weight the parallels with biblical passages deriving from the language of Isaiah 40:3 as more probative than the argument from redundancy.

As I read the commentary, it occurred to me that Skousen’s work might actually succeed in bringing LDS and RLDS (now Community of Christ) editions of the Book of Mormon closer together in the future. Historically, Book of Mormon editions have been produced by sectarian committees along separate denominational lines. But Skousen’s work takes into account prior editions from both traditions, and his lodestar is sound text-critical scholarship, with no place for sectarian bias. While I anticipate that, for the foreseeable future, Latter-day Saint editions will continue to be based on Orson Pratt’s versification system and Community of Christ editions will not, I would not be at all surprised to see the editions produced by the two groups come closer together in their textual readings as a result of having the solid framework of a well-established critical text that Skousen is in the process of providing.

Also, as I read I entertained the (possibly fanciful) notion that the tools Skousen is in the process of giving us for Book of Mormon textual criticism may actually be superior to what we have for the Bible itself. For instance, the standard critical text of the Hebrew Bible, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*,⁶ is woefully inadequate in its recitation of evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls (a new and improved edition is in the process of preparation), and Bruce M. Metzger’s *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*,⁷ while a wonderful tool, is nowhere near as extensive or detailed as Skousen’s work. I finally concluded, however, that in many respects this was an unfair, apples-to-oranges comparison, given the vastly greater number of witnesses, the greater antiquity of the sources, and the different languages involved in biblical textual criticism as



Orson Pratt (1811–1881) established the versification system used in Latter-day Saint editions of the Book of Mormon. Courtesy IRI.

compared with the textual criticism of the Book of Mormon. Still, I think Skousen’s work stacks up quite well against the biblical materials with which I am familiar.

I must confess a certain disappointment with Skousen’s decision not to produce an actual critical edition of the Book of Mormon, as he initially

had contemplated in his essay “Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon” in *BYU Studies*.⁸ I have seen enough of the critical text project now to feel quite comfortable that all of the basic information will be made available through his chosen format in this series, and I have every intention of collecting all of the future volumes as they are issued. But I would still like to see an actual critical edition in print at the conclusion of the critical text project, preferably in a smaller format than the large volumes of the series so far, and for an inexpensive price. Such a volume could serve as a sort of summary of the conclusions Skousen has reached through the project as a whole, it would be accessible and within the buying power of students, and it would be portable (much like the critical editions produced by the United Bible Societies), something one could stick in a briefcase or read on a plane. I hope that Skousen has not completely closed the door on the possibility of issuing such an edition at the conclusion of the critical text project.

In conclusion, I was deeply impressed by this commentary. Skousen’s linguistic control of the English language and his rigor in dealing with the textual materials was nothing short of masterful. This is an ongoing, seminal work in Latter-day Saint scholarship, and a standard against which subsequent text-critical studies of Mormon scripture will be judged. The bar has been set exceedingly high. I would like to finish by expressing to Skousen and those who have worked with him on this project my heartiest congratulations for a job very, very well done. Even casual students of the Bible have long had easily accessible the tools necessary to study it closely from a text-critical perspective; it is about time that the Book of Mormon joined the Bible’s company in that regard. Skousen’s text-critical scholarship is, in my judgment, well worthy of its object, the Book of Mormon, which is high praise indeed. 📖