

ISAIAH IN THE BIBLE AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

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David P. Wright's article is essentially a critique of my rather lengthy study "Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon."¹ An earlier version of Wright's article has been available on the Internet for a few years, but its revision and publication in *American Apocrypha* prompted me to write this review of Wright's work.²

The publication of Royal Skousen's research on the textual history of the Book of Mormon not long before Wright's article appeared in print makes available for the first time typescripts of the extant original and complete printer's manuscripts of the Book of Mormon, including

1. Originally available in 1983, my "Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon" was published in *Isaiah and the Prophets: Inspired Voices from the Old Testament*, ed. Monte S. Nyman (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1984), 165–77.

2. While I do not reject all of Wright's arguments, I find some of them insignificant. For example, he protests too much when he minimizes version support for the addition of the conjunction *and* in some Isaiah passages quoted in the Book of Mormon and then places emphasis on other matters that are truly minimal.

Review of David P. Wright. "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah." In *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, 157–234. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002. xvii + 368 pp. \$21.95.

emendations made in the manuscripts themselves.³ Skousen's work is invaluable as a means of correcting both my earlier study of the Isaiah variants and Wright's assumptions about those variants.

My study of the Isaiah variants was prompted by an unpublished paper by Arthur Chris Eccel that had been circulated during the late 1960s at the University of Utah. Eccel argues that the variations in the Isaiah texts cited in the Book of Mormon were made by Joseph Smith, whom he had come to regard as the author of the book. He contends that the distribution of the variants suggested that Joseph made more changes when he first began his work and that, as he wearied of trying to modify the Isaiah text, fewer and fewer variants appeared in his dictation of the Book of Mormon. My study demonstrated that Eccel was wrong and that many of the Isaiah variants in the Nephite record found support in ancient versions of the biblical text. Since that time, it has been argued that, following the loss of the 116 pages of dictation by Martin Harris, Joseph returned to the translation at the point where he had left off—the book of Mosiah—and that the records on the small plates of Nephi (1 Nephi through Words of Mormon) were translated last.⁴ This would mean that the very first extant Isaiah passages that Joseph Smith dictated were the ones found in Mosiah,⁵ which differ little from how those passages appear in the King James

3. Royal Skousen, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon and The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 2 parts (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001). For a summary of the project and its findings, see M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts, eds., *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

4. "How Long Did It Take to Translate the Book of Mormon?" in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 1–8. The theory of Mosian priority was adopted for critical purposes by Brent Lee Metcalfe in his article "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 395–444. See also my review of Metcalfe's article in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 40–48, as well as Matthew Roper's review "A More Perfect Priority?" in the same number of *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 362–78.

5. We cannot know if there were Isaiah quotations in the 116 pages of the translation that Martin Harris lost.

Version (KJV) of the Bible.⁶ Thus, in all probability, Joseph did not begin at first by making extensive revisions to the Isaiah quotations and then by making fewer as time passed, as Eccel had postulated.

Wright's approach is similar to Eccel's, though he uses a different criterion to arrive at the conclusion that Joseph Smith authored the Book of Mormon. He suggests that the Book of Mormon changes to Isaiah passages were triggered by the occurrence of italicized words in the KJV. Words for which there is no direct equivalent in the original Hebrew but which are nonetheless necessary to render the meaning of the Hebrew text into English appear in italics. Wright makes the case that Joseph knew what the italics denoted and therefore felt that he could improve on the text by either eliminating the italicized words or substituting other words in their place (pp. 159–60).⁷ I had made the same assumption in my study of the Isaiah variants more than two decades ago.⁸

6. In response to an inquiry about the meaning of Isaiah 52:7–10 (Mosiah 12:20–24), Abinadi quoted Isaiah 53 and then explained it (see Mosiah 14–15). His explanation parallels those found in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls and in other early texts. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Ancient Texts in Support of the Book of Mormon," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 240–41; Tvedtnes, "How Beautiful upon the Mountains," in *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Covenant, 1999), 173–75; and Dana M. Pike, "'How Beautiful upon the Mountains': The Imagery of Isaiah 52:7–10," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998): 249–91.

7. Wright says that "in 1612 an edition used italics for these words, and this became part of all standard editions of the KJV from that time. Many of the variants in the BoM Isaiah over against the KJV occur precisely at these words" (p. 159). However, the Geneva Bible, published even earlier, in 1560, was the first complete Bible to be divided into verses, to be printed in roman type, and to use italics for words not found in the original but thought necessary in an English translation.

8. But in 2003 Matthew Roper and I noted that "a more recent study of the original and printer's manuscripts of the Book of Mormon shows that the words that are italicized in the King James Version of Isaiah were usually included in the manuscripts, but that they were dropped prior to the actual printing of the Book of Mormon." John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew P. Roper, "One Small Step," *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 155. This was our understanding based on what Royal Skousen had told us regarding his study of the manuscripts, but an examination of the published version of his study revealed a misunderstanding on our part. I now employ the readings in Skousen's *Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon* and *Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*.

The Variants

An examination of the italicized words in the KJV of Isaiah passages quoted in the Book of Mormon is instructive. Looking only at the more extensive Isaiah quotations (totaling 388 verses), 288 separate italicized words appear.⁹ Of these, the Book of Mormon omits 49 of the italicized words (17 percent) and changes 74 (26 percent), while retaining 165 (57 percent).¹⁰ The number of KJV italicized words retained by the Book of Mormon is greater than those both omitted or changed.

Wright goes one step further by suggesting that other changes to the Isaiah text in the Book of Mormon are also due to the presence of KJV italicized words. Even when Joseph Smith retained those italicized words, he often changed other words in a verse (p. 161). Table 1 is based on an analysis of the Isaiah verses that are quoted in lengthy excerpts in the Book of Mormon, both those verses that have italicized words and those that do not.

Table 1. Lengthy Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon compared to Isaiah KJV verses

	Book of Mormon verses with variants	Book of Mormon verses without variants	Total
Verses with italics in KJV	137	56	193
Verses without italics in KJV	62	133	195
Total	199	189	388

9. This analysis uses only the lengthy Isaiah quotations in the Book of Mormon, found in 1 Nephi 20–21; 2 Nephi 7–8; 12–24; Mosiah 14; and 3 Nephi 22. I excluded not only the Isaiah passages from 2 Nephi 27 because they are clearly paraphrases but also the very brief citations scattered elsewhere throughout the Book of Mormon.

10. Some verses have no italicized words, while others have more than one. I have counted two or more consecutive italicized words as a single instance of italics. Though I believe there are other explanations for some of the changes, in fairness to the statistical study, I included even minor changes (e.g., *even* vs. *yea*, *that* vs. *who* or *which*) in the “changed” category, along with instances where the italicized words were retained but their order was modified, even when the change might be attributable to other things going on in the Book of Mormon version.

Of the 388 verses contained in the lengthy Isaiah passages quoted in the Nephite record, 199 vary from those of the KJV Bible, while 189 verses correspond word for word with it. The fact that more than half the verses include variants challenges Wright's contention that "except for a few variants, the BoM text follows the KJV word for word" (p. 158, emphasis added). Some 193 of those KJV verses include italicized words. The Book of Mormon modified 137 (71 percent) of these but also modified 62 (32 percent) of the 195 KJV verses that include no italicized words.¹¹

This analysis suggests that while italicized words could have influenced Joseph Smith in modifying KJV Isaiah passages, they cannot have been the sole factor. An examination of the relevant passages in the original and printer's manuscripts of the Book of Mormon suggests that a more detailed study should include those earliest readings. A few sample passages will suffice.

Some variants are readily explained as scribal errors (e.g., the addition of the word *not* in 2 Nephi 13:6, the change from *an healer* to *a ruler* in 2 Nephi 13:7, and the addition of *Red* before *sea* in 2 Nephi 19:1). Some of them seem to be aural errors, where the scribe misheard the word (e.g., the change from *found* to *founded* in 2 Nephi 20:10,¹² the change from *found* to *proud* in 2 Nephi 23:14, and the change from *raiment* to *remnant* in 2 Nephi 14:19). The presence of a single italicized word in a verse would not likely have prompted Joseph Smith to add whole phrases in other parts of the verse (e.g., 1 Nephi 20:1–2,

11. These figures represent readings of the Isaiah passages in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon and do not take into account earlier editions. They exclude minor variations such as spelling (e.g., *neighbor* vs. *neighbour*, *for ever* vs. *forever*, *shew* vs. *show*, *nought* vs. *naught*, *colors* vs. *colours*, *woe* vs. *wo*), changes that are most likely due to the dialectal preferences of the translator or scribe (e.g., *toward* vs. *towards*, *upon* vs. *on*, *hath* vs. *has*), and dropping of the final *n* in *an* (before words beginning with *h*) and changing *thine* to *thy*. Also not counted among the variants are passages where KJV *which* was changed to *who* in the Book of Mormon; in most of these cases, the extant portions of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon have *which* crossed out and replaced above the line with *who*, while the printer's manuscript has the form *who*.

12. The Book of Mormon passage reads, "As my hand hath founded the kingdoms of the idols." This surely cannot be a deliberate change by Joseph Smith, for that would suggest that he believed that God was behind the establishment of idolatry.

4, 13–15; 21:7; 2 Nephi 7:1; 23:22).¹³ In some instances in which new phrases were added, the italicized word or words of that verse were retained. In other cases, long deletions unrelated to the italicized word(s) were made, as in 2 Nephi 7:10; 8:1, 9, 15. The word *violence* in Isaiah 53:9 was changed to *evil* in the printer's manuscript and in the printed version of Mosiah 14:9, though the italicized word remained unchanged.

Other variants have a more complex history when one examines the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon, from which most of the Book of Mormon was typeset. For example, the printer's manuscript of some Book of Mormon Isaiah passages lacks a word found in the KJV, which was later restored. These were apparently inadvertent omissions during Joseph Smith's dictation or during the copying of the original manuscript to produce the printer's manuscript. Thus, *their* in Isaiah 3:18 and *am* in Isaiah 6:8 KJV were omitted in the manuscript but later restored in 2 Nephi 13:18 and 2 Nephi 16:8. For the printer's manuscript of 2 Nephi 16:2, 6, the word *seraphims* appears precisely as in Isaiah 6:2, 6 KJV but omits the *s* in the published version. The word *bare* in Isaiah 53:12 KJV was misspelled *bear* in the printer's manuscript, leading to an overcorrection to *bore* in the printed version of Mosiah 14:12; the word is not italicized in the KJV, and the change is clearly unrelated to the KJV use of italics. Such facts call for a more thorough examination of the variants than anyone has yet undertaken.¹⁴

Similar situations appear when one examines the extant portions of the original manuscript (O) of the Book of Mormon and compares them with the printer's manuscript (P). Thus, while O of 1 Nephi 20:6 reads the same as Isaiah 48:6 KJV, P changes the order of the verbs

13. The phrase *or out of the waters of baptism* (1 Nephi 20:1) is not in the printer's manuscript or in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. It is clearly a later exegetical comment and not part of the original text.

14. The examples are drawn from Skousen, *Printer's Manuscript*, 190, 194, 332. He is currently in the process of publishing his detailed study, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, of which part one (1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10) was published this year by FARMS.

heard and seen to seen and heard, which is the way the published Book of Mormon reads. In such cases, the reading of O is evidence that Joseph Smith did not consciously correct this Isaiah passage during dictation of the Nephite record.

In 1 Nephi 20:11, O has the KJV wording *how should* from Isaiah 48:11, but the words were crossed out and replaced with *I will not suffer my name to be polluted*, which is the reading of P and the published version. Similarly, O includes the KJV word *other* (Isaiah 49:20), which was then crossed out and changed to *first*, which is the way P and the published Book of Mormon read for 1 Nephi 21:20. The words *the rivers* in Isaiah 50:2 KJV were retained in O but changed to *their rivers* in P and the printed version. The KJV of Isaiah 20:21 has *clave*, while O reads *claved*, with the *d* crossed out; but P has *cleaved*, while the published version reverts to KJV/O *clave*. In the same verse, KJV has *had*, which is the way O read before it was crossed out and replaced by *have*, which is the way P and the published version read. Variants such as these suggest that Wright's approach—and mine as well—needs to be refined in order to be useful.

King James Language in the Book of Mormon

"One might argue," according to Wright, "that the [Book of Mormon] wording is identical to the KJV because Joseph Smith sought to maintain biblical style. But this could have been done without word-for-word correspondence. For example, Isa. 7:7–9 might be translated independently of the KJV but with a biblical flavor" (p. 158). This statement is followed by a comparison of Wright's own translation of the passage printed side by side with the KJV reading. Certainly, it "could have been done" this way, but I am concerned about the methodology used here. Independent Bible translations can vary widely, even when following KJV style; since Wright is already biased against the Book of Mormon, it hardly seems appropriate to compare his own translation with that of the KJV.

Like others before him, Wright believes that Joseph Smith drew directly from the KJV when dictating the Book of Mormon, rather than translating from plates. Some Latter-day Saint scholars would

disagree with this assessment, based both on the probability that Joseph Smith did not own a copy of the Bible until after the Book of Mormon had already gone to press¹⁵ and on the fact that his wife Emma indicated that he had no materials from which he could read during the time of the translation.¹⁶

Why would Joseph Smith adopt the style of the KJV while translating or dictating revelations? Nearly a century after the publication of the Book of Mormon, in 1913, Robert Henry Charles published his magnum opus, a two-volume translation of ancient texts known as *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*.¹⁷ Charles, like Joseph Smith, imitated the style of the King James Bible.¹⁸ Charles seems to have done so because the New Testament cited some of these works or earlier writings upon which they depended.¹⁹ And because the KJV was the Bible most commonly read in the English-speaking world at that time, using its style ensured that readers of Charles's work would more readily make the tie between them.

Jewish scholar Theodor H. Gaster intermingled KJV language and modern English in his *Dead Sea Scriptures*.²⁰ When citing pas-

15. In October 1829, four months after completing the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph had Oliver Cowdery purchase a copy of the Bible for their use. See the discussion in John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper, "Joseph Smith's Use of the Apocrypha: Shadow or Reality?" *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 330–32. It is likely that the Bible from which Joseph Smith read as a young man remained with his father's family rather than being transported with the prophet to Harmony and then Fayette, where he dictated the Book of Mormon.

16. In an interview published in the *Saints' Advocate* 2/4 (October 1879): 51, Emma declared that, during the translation process, Joseph "had neither manuscript nor book to read from" and that "if he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me."

17. Robert H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913). Oxford University Press continues to reprint Charles's book.

18. For a comparison of KJV New Testament passages with parallel passages in Charles's *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and a more recent translation of the same passages by Howard C. Kee, see Tvedtnes and Roper, "Joseph Smith's Use of the Apocrypha," 334–37.

19. One could argue, as some scholars have, that the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* contain Christian interpolations, some of which draw on the New Testament.

20. Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, 3rd ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1976).

sages from the Dead Sea Scrolls that were also found in the Bible, he employed the older style of English. When Robert Lisle Lindsey began to work on the Gospel of Mark while living in Israel, he initially translated it "into simple modern Hebrew from the Greek text. The text was then distributed to Hebrew-speaking readers and comments invited." Many of those who reviewed the work expressed "the desire that the Gospels, as ancient works, should be read in Old Testament Hebrew style."²¹ Lindsey returned to the task and prepared a translation of Mark in biblical Hebrew that has received wide acclaim.

It is possible that the Book of Mormon would have met with the same fate as Lindsey's modern Hebrew version of Mark had Joseph Smith rendered it in nineteenth-century English. It would not have sounded scriptural to Americans and Englishmen familiar with the King James Bible. Another reason for using the KJV verbiage in the Book of Mormon is that it makes it easier for the reader to recognize when biblical books are being quoted by the Nephite prophets. In that respect, the language of the Book of Mormon fills the same role as Charles's translation of apocryphal and pseudepigraphic texts.

The phenomenon we see in the Book of Mormon is also known from the Bible. When New Testament writers included quotations from Isaiah or other Old Testament writings, they often employed the extant Greek translation known as the Septuagint rather than translate anew from the Hebrew text, even when the Greek text included translation errors. The same is true of the KJV itself, first published in 1611. Richard Bancroft, archbishop of Canterbury, instructed the translators to revise the Bishops' Bible (first edition 1568, last 1606) rather than prepare a new translation but made it clear that the translators were free to make necessary corrections. Several generations of earlier English Bibles were essentially revisions of their predecessors, so that the KJV ended up with 80 percent of the text of Tyndale's English translation, published between 1524 and 1528. Tyndale himself used some of the language of the Wycliffe Bible, which was prepared during the latter part of the fourteenth century.

21. From Lindsey's introduction to *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark* (Jerusalem: Baptist House, n.d.), 76; see also 78–79.

Modern Renditions

In a number of his examples of Isaiah variants, Wright reveals that the Book of Mormon follows the KJV in passages where “modern renditions” differ. For example, he notes that 2 Nephi 13:8 employs the KJV word *provoke* (from Isaiah 3:8), while modern renditions use “rebel against/defy/insult his glorious presence/glance/gaze” (p. 170). Some of Wright’s arguments fail when one looks at the meaning of the KJV words as used in Joseph Smith’s day. In this example, Webster’s 1828 dictionary defines *provoke* as “challenge,” which is clearly in agreement with the “modern renditions” that Wright cites. Similarly, where 2 Nephi 15:2 follows KJV “he fenced it” (Isaiah 5:2), the modern renditions read “‘he dug it,’ ‘made a trench,’ ‘broke the ground’” (p. 170). A simple check of the 1828 Webster notes that the word *fence* means “a wall, hedge, ditch,” the third example fitting well with the modern renderings. From examples such as this, it is clear that a thorough study of the Isaiah passages of the Book of Mormon should determine what the words meant in Joseph Smith’s day.

Wright is not the first critic to point out presumed errors in the KJV’s translation of Hebrew words that were perpetuated in the Book of Mormon. What is surprising is that some of these “errors” are an illusion because some of the KJV words had a different meaning in nineteenth-century American English than they do today. For example, the word *curious*, which is used to describe various artifacts ten times in the KJV (Exodus 28:8, 27–28; 29:5; 35:32; 39:5, 20–21; Leviticus 8:7; Acts 19:19) and six times in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 16:10; 18:1; Alma 37:39; 63:5; Helaman 6:11; Ether 10:27) should not be understood as “strange” or “inquisitive.” In all of those passages, it means “skilled” and alludes to the craftsmanship that produced the artifact. That the word continued to have this meaning in nineteenth-century American English is affirmed by Webster’s 1828 dictionary and its use in describing Mormon’s plates in the Testimony of Eight Witnesses, published near the beginning of the Book of Mormon.

Wright’s comments about 2 Nephi 18:19–20, which cites Isaiah 8:19–20, are surprising. Though he acknowledges that the passage “is obscure in the Hebrew” and that “the KJV is likewise obscure

and the BoM version essentially retains that obscurity," he nonetheless notes a "modern translation" (p. 171). I do not see how a different English rendering of an admittedly "obscure" Hebrew passage bears on the soundness of the Book of Mormon text.²² The same could be said of several other Hebrew passages that Wright calls "obscure" or "unintelligible" or that he says do "not make clear sense" (e.g., pp. 171–72).

Some Minor Issues

In addition to the major issues discussed above, other elements of Wright's article should be questioned. For the sake of dialogue, it would have been useful for Wright to use abbreviations and terminology already adopted for discussion of Joseph Smith's revision of the Bible. Rather than use the abbreviation JST (Joseph Smith Translation), which has been included since 1979 in the church's publication of the KJV,²³ Wright introduces a new abbreviation, JSR, to refer to his revision (p. 160). His hesitancy to use JST may be based on current usage of the term *translation* to denote rendering a text in a different language, but his reticence is really unwarranted. Joseph Smith himself called it a "new translation," and the verb *translate* in Webster's 1828 dictionary has a range of meanings that includes terms such as *transfer* and *transmit*. Joseph Smith need not have believed that he was rendering a Hebrew or Greek text into English for the JST but that he was transmitting ancient knowledge lost over time. Wright's introduction of a new abbreviation, JSR, may have been influenced by the fact that Brent Metcalfe, one of the editors of the book in which Wright's article appears, has also introduced new abbreviations for Latter-day Saint scriptures on his Web site.

22. The Nephite record (here referring to the plates rather than to the English translation produced by Joseph Smith) preserves a version of Isaiah, but quite clearly not the autograph of Isaiah. Instead, it relies on the version contained in the brass plates of Laban. This does not mean that the brass plates were error-free since they were undoubtedly copies.

23. The edition of the KJV Bible currently used by Latter-day Saints was first published in 1979 with extensive study aids, including important variants found in the JST.

Wright cites an 1831 article from a Philadelphia newspaper (p. 160). It is clearly hearsay and, as far as I can determine, unattested by statements made by Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, about whom the article speaks. That the newspaper account was an invention or embellishment can be seen by the fact that it says that Joseph Smith placed the plates inside his hat. Descriptions of the size of the plates suggest that they were much too large to place inside his hat; indeed, according to other testimony, it was the translation device that Joseph put inside the hat. The article further states that Joseph Smith memorized portions of the New Testament so he could “read [them] from the plates” while Martin Harris followed along in the corresponding Bible passage. One wonders how the reporters got such information; surely Joseph Smith would not have acknowledged his supposed fraud, and since Martin Harris continued to support Joseph’s work, he was evidently not aware of the alleged deception. To be sure, Wright acknowledges that “the correctness of certain details throughout the article may be questioned, and although it seeks to ridicule Smith’s claims, the account appears to reflect more or less correctly Smith’s attitude toward the italicized words and shows that these were of concern early on in the production of the BoM” (pp. 160–61). But all the newspaper article really demonstrates is that *the reporter* knew what the italicized words meant.

Future Studies

This field is still open for further work—for example, one could respond to Wright’s evaluation of each of the variants found in the Book of Mormon. Skousen’s publications provide a tool for such research.