The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon

PART THREE
The Nature of the Original Language

Royal Skousen

with the collaboration of Stanford Carmack
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THE HISTORY OF THE TEXT OF THE BOOK OF MORMON
The Original Text: Its Language and Issues

In this introductory chapter, I discuss three common views regarding the translation of the Book of Mormon, ones that I myself accepted as reasonable early on in my work as editor of the Book of Mormon critical text:

1. Joseph Smith received ideas and put them into his own words.

2. Joseph Smith is responsible for the resulting English language in the text: namely, the upstate New York English dialect and the nonstandard English that is found throughout the original text. Moreover, the meaning of the words in the book follows Joseph Smith’s own understanding. And the biblical style found in the text proper (beyond the biblical quotes themselves) is simply imitative of the King James Bible.

3. We may say that the Book of Mormon is “for our times”; more precisely, the book deals with the religious and political issues of Joseph Smith’s time.

As a result of my work on the text over the past three decades, I have come to the conclusion that all three of these views are basically wrong to some degree or another. And these revisions in my viewpoint are, I will argue, based on evidence, not wishful thinking.

A revealed text, transmitted word for word

The first major point I wish to take up in this introduction is the evidence that Joseph Smith himself was not the author of the Book of Mormon nor even the actual translator of its English language text. Instead, the evidence is very strong that the original text was revealed to Joseph Smith word for word in English and he dictated it to scribes. The text is not Joseph’s creation, nor did he create a text in his own language. There are two main sources for this claim that the Book of Mormon text is specific and revealed. First of all, we have six actual witnesses of the translation process. And second, we have evidence from the original manuscript itself as well as from the text the scribes wrote down as Joseph Smith dictated it to them. Let us consider each of these points.

In this introductory chapter, there are relatively few references. Except for the Reformed Protestant nature of the Book of Mormon, every topic discussed herein is taken up in detail elsewhere in volume 3: grammatical editing is discussed in parts 1 and 2, the nature of the original language in parts 3 and 4, the King James quotations in part 5, the witness of the translation process in part 6, and conjectural emendations in part 7.

An earlier version of this chapter was presented at a symposium on "Exploring the Complexities in the English Language of the Book of Mormon", sponsored by BYU Studies and the Interpreter Foundation, 14 March 2015, at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Its original title was "A theory! A theory! We have already got a theory, and there cannot be any more theories!"
1 · Archaic Vocabulary

All of the words listed here still exist in English, but in the Book of Mormon they sometimes take on a meaning that dates from Early Modern English. In some cases, it is clear from the Oxford English Dictionary that the Book of Mormon meaning died out of English in the 1500s or 1600s, depending on the word (see, for instance, under counsel, depart, and welfare). In other cases, the modern reading will work in the Book of Mormon, but only loosely. When we look closely at the context in which the word occurs, we often find that an archaic meaning works better (thus detect, idleness, and rebellion). Sometimes there is only one or two exceptional instances of the word that take on the archaic meaning, while the other instances of the word take on our modern, expected usage: but, call, give, great, may, tell, and whereby. We also have a few examples of archaic pronunciations that ceased to exist prior to the end of the Early Modern English period, such as neithermost and raigned. And finally, there is one conjectured word, sermon, which works much better, given the context, than what appears in the standard text, ceremony. The OED shows that some of the verbs died out early, in the mid-1500s (for instance, counsel with the meaning 'to consult'); some have survived into modern times but as verbs re-created from past-participial forms (see, for instance, the verbs engraven and molten). Occasionally, an archaic verb use (see under devour) died out in late Middle English (around 1400), or the use of an archaic verb meaning (such as detect with its meaning 'to expose') is found in the second half of the 1700s. The examples in this section, along with the archaic ones that follow in the next few sections, argue that the vocabulary of the Book of Mormon largely dates from the 1530s up into the 1730s. This means that the meaning of the words in the Book of Mormon was already dated when the text was revealed to Joseph Smith in 1828 and 1829, that its vocabulary mostly occurred one to three centuries earlier than Joseph's own language.

Assured ‘sure’

“for I am assured that if ye had known me, ye would not have suffered that . . .” (Mosiah 7:33)

Beloved ‘to love’

“among those who had so dearly beloved them” (Alma 27:4)

Break ‘to stop’ or ‘to interrupt’

“no monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar them” (Ether 6:10)

But ‘unless’

“I greatly fear lest my case shall be awful but I confess unto God” (Jacob 7:19)

Call ‘need’

“thus we see the great call of the diligence of men to labor in the vineyards” (Alma 28:14)