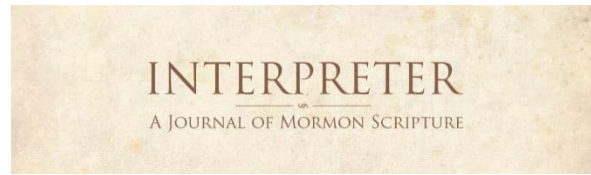




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A Brief History of Critical Text Work on the Book of Mormon

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Royal Skousen

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF CRITICAL TEXT WORK ON THE BOOK OF MORMON

Royal Skousen

I begin this brief historical account of alternative work on the critical text of the Book of Mormon by including material that I wrote in an original, longer review of John S. Dinger's *Significant Textual Changes in the Book of Mormon* (Smith-Pettit Foundation: Salt Lake City, Utah, 2013). The final, shorter review appears in *BYU Studies* 53:1 (2014). The *Interpreter* recently published Robert F. Smith's review of Dinger. In these additional comments, I especially concentrate on work done in the 1970s by Stan Larson on the text of the Book of Mormon. In the latter part of this account, I discuss the more recent work of Shirley Heater in producing *The Book of Mormon: Restored Covenant Edition*.

Critical Text Work Prior to 1988

One issue that I feel Dinger could deal with more justly is his history of previous critical text work on the Book of Mormon, found on pages xxvii-xxix of his introduction. First of all, I myself do not feel that Jerald and Sandra Tanner's *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon* (1965) "deserves special mention." Although it lists all those changes from the 1830 edition to the then-current LDS edition (dating from 1920), most of the differences are insignificant changes involving typos, spelling, and grammatical editing, yet all of them are lumped together with the more important changes. A scholarly study of textual changes must distinguish between the different kinds of change, but since the Tanners' work is polemic and not

scholarly, it pointedly questions why there should be all these changes in the Book of Mormon if God gave the text in the first place. (Of course, they never ask this question of the biblical scriptures, which are definitely not textually invariant—or inerrant.) The assumptions of the Tanners’ book are so naive that it is not worth quoting in textual analysis of the Book of Mormon, much less listing it with the other studies that Dinger mentions. In contrast to the Tanners’ work, I have a paper online that describes in some details all the different kinds of changes that the Book of Mormon text has undergone: namely, “Textual Changes in the Book of Mormon”, <fairlds.org>, posted February 2011 (although earlier forms of this paper have been online since 2002). In that paper, I point out, indirectly, that the Tanners undercounted the number by a considerable amount:

Now we come to the big topic that so many people are exercised over: How many changes are there in the Book of Mormon text? I don’t know for sure, and I’ll tell you why it’s hard to count them. In my computerized collation of the two manuscripts and 20 significant editions of the Book of Mormon, I can count the number of places of variation. These are places where there’s a textual variant. The variant itself can involve spelling, punctuation, words missing or added, a grammatical change, and so on. In all, there are about 105,000 places of variation in the computerized collation. For comparison, there are about 270,000 words in the Book of Mormon.

But even this number of variants, 105,000, is misleading. Suppose you have an example where the manuscripts have no punctuation, and the 1830 typesetter put in a semicolon and a later edition made it a colon; then even

later the colon was made a period, but finally it was changed back to a semicolon. All of these changes are listed under one variant; it's a single place of variation, but within that variant there could be 4 or 5 changes. So the real issue, borrowing from Proverbs, is "with all thy counting get understanding".

In that article I list the kinds of changes. First, there are changes in what we call the accidentals: (1) specifying chapters and verses; (2) paragraphing; (3) punctuation; (4) spelling of common English words; and (5) capitalization. Then I list the kinds of textually substantive changes: (1) spelling of names; (2) distinguishing between homophones (such as *rights* versus *rites*); (3) grammatical usage; (4) phraseology; (5) stylistic clarifications; and (6) changes that affect meaning. In my opinion, the second group of changes has the ones we need to count. At the end of the article, I discuss "five chestnuts", a handful of substantive textual changes that anti-Mormons have been complaining about for years. One simply cannot use the Tanners' work as a serious study of textual changes in the Book of Mormon text.

Jeffrey R. Holland's 1966 master's thesis lists some of the major textual changes in the early editions of the Book of Mormon. He has some interesting commentary in some places, but it is all easily recoverable by consulting those printed editions. Holland did not examine the manuscripts in this work, so there is no discussion of the changes that occurred during the earliest transmission of the text (in the manuscripts and in typesetting the 1830 edition). The first work to do that was Stan Larson's 1974 master's thesis, followed by other publications of his that dealt with the text of the Book of Mormon. In particular, Larson discussed the issue of homophones in the text and made a number of suggestions for certain words, most of which was adopted in the 1981 LDS edition.

Dinger, to be sure, refers to my work on the critical text project. And in footnote 41 on page xxvii he lists some other critical text work that has been done, namely, Lamoni Call's 1898 work, James Wardle's 1963 work, and the RLDS church historian Richard P. Howard's work in publications dating from 1969 and 1995. Unfortunately, Dinger fails to list the important precursor to the current critical text project, Robert F. Smith's 1984-87 work, *Book of Mormon Critical Text*, published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) in three volumes (and in two editions). Indeed, Bob Smith's critical text is the first one ever published on the Book of Mormon! And Dinger surely knows about it since he lists (on page xxxiii) in his bibliography ("Abbreviations and Experts Consulted") an article of mine in which I published 8 pages (56-63) reviewing the FARMS critical text, namely "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon", *BYU Studies* 30/1 (Winter 1990), 41-69. And I also discuss Smith's critical text on page 8 of Bradford and Coutts' edited work, *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, also listed on page xxxiii of Dinger's bibliography. One wonders how one could find the works done by Lamoni Call and James Wardle, yet somehow miss FARMS's original project done under Bob Smith. To be sure, there is no reference to Shirley Heater's work (described below), but it is likely that Dinger knew nothing of her work since it is by RLDS researchers.

Larson's Foreword to Dinger's 2013 Work

It is also worth commenting on Stan Larson's foreword in Dinger's critical text and his, Larson's, brief history of the textual criticism of the Book of Mormon. One observation seems immediate: Larson's foreword appears to have been written independently of Dinger's work. First of all, Larson claims that Dinger's book "represents an important step in documenting and tracking the changes in a way that is clear

to the current reader” (page vii). Perhaps it represents an important step – but it’s in the wrong direction, showing us how not to do a critical edition. Larson further claims that Dinger “has succeeded in presenting these changes in an easy-to-follow format” (page vii), which is not even close to being true. One might seriously wonder if Larson even looked over Dinger’s text and actually tried to use it. Larson also adds that this work will “greatly facilitate the appreciation of the Book of Mormon and its textual development and history” (page vii). If anything, Dinger’s system, by omitting variation within the manuscripts and in the early printed editions, obscures (and in some cases, hides) the actual textual history.

Larson also implies that Dinger is careful in that “he does not attempt to suggest reasons for the changes [or] to discuss their possible significance” (page vii). To be sure, commentary on the changes is definitely not expected in a critical edition. That’s because there isn’t room for it. In the appendix to the Yale edition of the Book of Mormon, for instance, I list 719 textually significant changes in the history of the Book of Mormon (see pages 745-789). But I point out, in order to understand these changes listed on 45 pages, one must refer to the 4,060 pages contained in volume 4 of the critical text, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies: Provo, Utah, 2004-2009). In many respects, the traditional critical text is now outdated. One gets a text (either an eclectic text or a base text) plus an apparatus listing variants, but little else. Typically in an introduction, there will be a brief description of the textual sources and statements about their significance. And I provide that in the Yale edition. But the listing of changes means little except to the scholarly reader, who uses the critical text as a convenient summary. To get the analysis, one has to go elsewhere.

For instance, one can have a copy of the critical text of the Greek New Testament in hand (either the United Bible Societies' *The Greek New Testament* or the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*), but to understand why the editors have chosen a particular reading for this eclectic text, one must go elsewhere. A good beginning is Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, which specifically explains the reasons for the editors' choices in the Greek New Testament critical text. Or there is the more recent and longer work by Philip Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary*. A novice cannot just look at the apparatus of the Greek New Testament critical text and really understand why codex B, say, is accepted in one case but not in another.

The same holds for the critical text of the Book of Mormon. This is why I constantly refer readers to the six books in volume 4 of the critical text. Of course, what we need in this modern-day world of computers are online electronic texts where textual variants are listed and then linked to the commentary (as well as photographic images of the textual sources). That day will come, I predict, when scholars and owners of manuscripts and texts will finally see the vision of how to do it all. In the meantime, Larson—in his foreword to Dinger's work—lists about two dozen textual changes in the Book of Mormon and comments on the reasons for the changes and their significance. And I have discussed virtually every one of Dinger's footnoted changes in my own *Analysis of Textual Variants* (ATV), since it can be shown that Dinger derived his changes from what I discussed in ATV.

Conjectural Emendations in the Text

Larson further notes, seemingly with approval, that Dinger never offers "his own emendations and/or 'correct' readings" (page vii), which indeed many textual critics also avoid in their critical editions. But other critics may decide to supply

some conjectures in the notes, sometimes even in an eclectic text, which in any event are identified as emendations and are often accompanied by the names of those who first proposed them. Yet it is also worth pointing out that many of the changes that scribes, typesetters, and editors have made in the text of the Book of Mormon over the years are, in fact, conjectural emendations, and the numbers are surprisingly high:

Oliver Cowdery made 131 conjectures in O and in P;

John Gilbert, the 1830 typesetter, made 167 conjectures in the 1830 edition;

Joseph Smith made 198 conjectures in his editing for the 1837 edition, and he made 19 more for the 1840 edition;

Orson Pratt made 8 conjectures in the 1849 British edition;

Franklin and Samuel Richards made 17 conjectures in the 1852 British edition;

Orson Pratt made 9 more conjectures in the 1879 edition;

German Ellsworth, the Northern States mission president in Chicago, made 8 conjectures in several editions published from 1905 through 1911;

James Talmage made 130 conjectures in the 1920 edition;

and the 1981 LDS scriptures committee made 10 conjectures.

In fact, this insertion of conjectures into the text holds for virtually any text that has a textual history: it will contain textual emendations that were conjectures when they first

entered the text. So Dinger's footnotes contain emendations and corrected readings that were made earlier in the history of the Book of Mormon text. I have recently discussed this issue at some length because some seem to think that conjectural emendation has never played a role (or should never play a role) in the history of the Book of Mormon text or in the recovery of its original text. As Larson states, Dinger "leaves these tasks to other researchers".

To be sure, I have proposed quite a few emendations to the text in the six parts of volume 4 of the critical text, *Analysis of Textual Variants*. And in volume 4, I provide evidence for making these emendations. And since many of them appear now in the Yale edition of the Book of Mormon (2009), they are part of the textual history and can now be listed as actual variants! For additional discussion, see my recent article "The Original Text of the Book of Mormon and its Publication by Yale University Press", *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, volume 7 (2013), 57-96, available online at <MormonInterpreter.com>, posted on 27 September 2013.

Engaging in the Scholarly Debate

I will briefly say here that there is often much to disagree with Larson on in his interpretation of the reason and significance for the changes he discusses. I will not go into these differences here because one should go to *Analysis of Textual Variants* to see what I have had to say there. In particular, I discuss all of Larson's own proposals for changes in the text (including conjectural emendations), many of which were adopted in the 1981 LDS edition; in ATV, I identify 22 of his proposals, by name and accompanied by the appropriate bibliographic reference.

I might add here that in some of his commentary in this foreword to Dinger's work, Larson does not fully engage in arguments that I have proposed in ATV. He writes as if those

arguments don't exist. See especially his discussion (on page xi) of the issues regarding the proposal to the change of the name *Benjamin* to *Mosiah* in Mosiah 21:28 and Ether 4:1. There is internal evidence for maintaining the earliest reading in these two passages, namely *Benjamin*. In his foreword, Larson ignores this evidence and dismisses the occurrence of *Benjamin* by simply relying on a quote from Sidney Sperry that the use of the name *Benjamin* in these two passages is “an out-and-out-error”. Yet Larson ignores Hugh Nibley's statement in support of *Benjamin*, including a letter that Nibley himself wrote to Larson some years ago (which Larson reproduced in his MA thesis – and which I quote in ATV). Here in his foreword, Larson does not engage in the ongoing scholarly discussion, nor does he mention it. I devote over three pages to this issue in ATV.

In the same exclusionary way, Larson discusses the restoration of various readings in the 1981 LDS edition and implies that in one case he single-handedly took extra measures to make sure that the longer original reading in Alma 32:30 showed up in that edition (see his discussion on pages viii and ix). Yet the RLDS church restored those readings a long time ago in their 1908 edition, and this cannot be passed over in silence. See ATV regarding the dittography in 3 Nephi 22:4 and the visual skip in Alma 32:30, both first noted (and corrected) by RLDS editors.

Reading the Textual Sources

Larson makes some mistakes in how he interprets the texts. For instance, he says that in O for 1 Nephi 15:36 (discussed on page xiii) the *s* of *seperated* “has to be supplied. In this case, it is not just illegible, it is due to the fact that this part of the leaf is missing.” This is not quite correct. The *s* is partially extant. Most of the *s* is there, at the edge of a loose fragment. You can read the *s*. It is not conjectured. This is what (*s*)*eperated*, my

transcript of the word in volume 1 of the critical text, actually means: the *s* within the parentheses is still partially extant.

Another example is Larson's description of the textual variant in 2 Nephi 33:4 (discussed on page xiii). He says that all printed editions read "the **words** which I have written in weakness", when in actual fact the 1830 edition reads "the **things** which I have written in weakness" (which is identical to how the printer's manuscript originally read until Joseph Smith emended *things* to *word* in his editing of P for the 1837 edition). In fact, Dinger has this variation correctly recorded on page 90 (here, for once, Dinger distinguishes between the original reading in P and Joseph's correction of it):

the **things**⁷⁴⁹ which I have written in weakness

749. PMs: things; PMs-cor: ~~things~~ word; 1837: words.

This kind of mistake only confirms my conclusion that Larson wrote his foreword independently of Dinger's text, and apparently no one checked the details of his foreword before going to press.

Examining the Actual Manuscripts or Photographs of Them

Larson makes a point of how he discovered errors in the original manuscript, including the visual skip in Alma 32:30: "In 1972, with a magnifying glass in hand, I read the extant leaves of the Original Manuscript" (page viii). In contrast, I discovered in my own work with the original manuscript that it was much easier to find errors in the text by not trying to read the actual manuscript (which is very difficult to read except for the first part of 1 Nephi) but by examining the ultraviolet photographs of the manuscript that were made by Ernst Koehler for the LDS Church between 1949 and 1954. Dean Jessee, in his 1970 article in *BYU Studies* on the original manuscript confirms this assessment of mine: "These photographs offer the best means for reading the text of the manuscript." I always assumed that

Larson would have also used these photographs in his work on O. Maybe we should take his word on this, especially when we consider the large number of newly discovered readings in O that were missed by Larson. It would be helpful in evaluating Larson's work if he provided a more in-depth account of his work on the original manuscript in Salt Lake City (and the work he did later on the printer's manuscript or with the large photocopy of P, called the copyflow, that the RLDS church archivists typically provided to researchers in Independence in those days).

The Poor Spelling in the Original Manuscript

I feel some need to comment on Larson's evaluation of the original manuscript near the beginning of his foreword: "The Original Manuscript is inferior to the other texts in such non-essentials as spelling, capitalization, and grammar" (page vii). This idea, I believe, was first promoted by Dick Howard in 1969 in the first edition of his *Restoration Scriptures* and repeated in his second edition in 1995. On pages 12-17 of the second edition, Howard argues that the original manuscript (what he prefers to call "the Dictated Manuscript") should be considered "a first draft" and that the printer's manuscript (what he prefers to call "the Emended Manuscript") shows various refinements in the text, thus providing "a more readable, grammatically correct text for the first edition of 1830" (page 12). Howard then provides a three-column comparison between the two manuscripts and the 1830 edition for the text found on page 10 of O (covering 1 Nephi 7:3-17). And he shows how P improves on the numerous mistakes in spelling and capitalization in O. Indeed it does! And that's because here O and P were written by different scribes: O was written by scribe 3 of O, possibly Christian Whitmer, and P was written by Oliver Cowdery. But Oliver was not emending scribe 3's accidentals; instead, he was

using his own accidentals (spellings and punctuation) as he copied the text of O into P.

The problem in making the comparison for this part of the text is that these two scribes show considerable differences in their spelling abilities. Scribe 3 of O was, to be sure, a third-rate speller; Oliver Cowdery was a second-rate speller; and the 1830 typesetter, John Gilbert, was a first-rate speller. Thus we see a steady improvement in spelling and capitalization in going from O to P and then from P to the 1830 edition. If Howard had compared portions of O and P that were both written in Oliver Cowdery's hand (such as virtually anything in the book of Alma), he would have discovered no real difference at all. (He probably chose to compare the text here in 1 Nephi because the leaves of O were much easier to read.) Ultimately, there is no real emendation of the text in going from O to P, in either accidentals or substantives. Oliver's spelling and capitalization is basically the same. And Oliver tends to create incorrect readings and omit words and phrases, so the text actually deteriorates rather than improves. Oliver isn't trying to emend the text; he's just trying to copy it (and he follows his own spelling and capitalization).

There are some words that Oliver Cowdery learned to spell correctly as the 1830 edition was being typeset (Oliver was usually the one who proofed the 1830 signatures against the manuscript), and so for some words his spelling between O and P improved. For instance, when Oliver got to 3 Nephi 12:12 of P, he had finally learned how to spell the word *exceeding*(ly), with the double *e* after the *xc*. Prior to that, Oliver had consistently spelled the word with a single *e* after the *xc*, as *exceding*(ly), in O and also in P up through 3 Nephi 8:21. Having actually learned how to spell a word correctly, Oliver wrote it that way, as we would expect. But in some cases, Oliver had difficulty learning the correct spelling, and he switched back and forth before finally settling in on the correct spelling. For instance,

Oliver wrote three instances of the correct *fought* (in Alma 43-49 of O), then he followed that by seven instances of *faught* in Alma 52-60 of O before switching back to the correct *fought* in O (at Alma 62) and continuing with *fought* into P (at Omni). Then suddenly, when he got to Mosiah 9 in P, Oliver switched back to *faught* (with four instances in a row in Mosiah), but then finally, when he got to Alma 43 in P, he used the standard *fought* all the way to the end (26 times). In each case, Oliver used his current spelling; his only problem was that he had difficulty making up his mind about how to spell *fought*. In no case was he trying to emend the spelling in O.

The Critical Text Work of Shirley Heater

Beginning in 1985, an independent RLDS researcher, Shirley Heater, worked on producing *The Book of Mormon: Restored Covenant Edition* (RCE), and by 1999 it had been published by the Zarahemla Research Foundation (ZRF) of Independence, Missouri. Heater's book announces itself on its title page as the "Restored Covenant Edition / With text restored to its purity from the Original and Printer's Manuscripts". The grammar is regularized, so the RCE is not technically "the original text" but a grammatically adjusted, reconstructed recension of it. Nonetheless, Heater had published a text based in part on my work. She had consulted with me several times in the 1990s, and early on I had provided her with information about some of the changes in the Book of Mormon text as well as allowing her to use an early version of my transcript of the original manuscript for 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi. (My complete transcriptions for the two Book of Mormon manuscripts were finally published in 2001.)

It soon became apparent that Heater would publish her text of the Book of Mormon before my transcripts would appear, so I decided to hold back on providing access to all of my findings. However, through diligent work on her own she

was able to recover many of the other original readings from various photographs of the original manuscript (in part from a difficult-to-read microfilm version that the LDS Church had earlier provided to some archival libraries). In fact, her 1999 publication of the Book of Mormon shows that she was able to recover about 78 percent of the significant textual changes that have been found from examining the original manuscript or improved photographs of it. A summary of the textual sources for the RCE can be found in the ZRF's 2000 publication, *A Comparison of the Book of Mormon Manuscripts & Editions*, acknowledged as coming from Shirley Heater's work, although there is no mention of my work in that publication. She does acknowledge it, though, in research materials published by ZRF in 1992 under her own name.

Basically, Heater and I were in continual correspondence in the early years of the critical text project, and I provided her with a good number of changes in the text based on my early work on the transcript of the original manuscript. I did not have any problem with what Heater and other researchers might do with my work on the manuscripts, although I wanted my complete transcripts to be published first. As I have said many times, the Book of Mormon is for the whole world. The printer's manuscript is owned by the Community of Christ (formerly the RLDS Church), and clearly they (and others) should be allowed to use the results of my work. In her published research materials, Heater always acknowledged her debt to the Book of Mormon critical text project. I have always intended for the results of my work to be used by the LDS Church, the RLDS Church, and the Bickertonites from the Pittsburgh area (in fact, their scriptures committee visited me a number of times in the 1990s).

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