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The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

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The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

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Royal Skousen

I would like to begin this paper with a brief overview of the critical text project of the Book of Mormon. I will then discuss some of the more recent findings of this project.

The main purposes of this critical text project are (1) to establish the original English language text of the Book of Mormon, to the extent that it can be discovered; and (2) to determine the history of the text, in particular, the changes that the text has undergone, both editorial and accidental.

The first step of this project is to create computerized versions of the textual sources. This includes facsimile transcripts of the two manuscripts: namely, the original manuscript and the printer's manuscript. The original manuscript was written down by Joseph Smith's scribes as Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon. The printer's manuscript is a copy of the original manuscript and was used by the printer to set the type for the 1830 edition. In addition to the electronic versions of these two manuscripts, 17 significant editions of the Book of Mormon have also been electronically reproduced. Computerized comparisons of these 19 textual sources will allow us to make a detailed study of the textual history of the Book of Mormon.

This project began in May 1988 and will probably take another three years to complete the task of producing the critical text itself. Financial support for this project has come from BYU (notably the College of Humanities, the Department of English, and the Religious Studies Center) as well as from Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), the Keter

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Foundation, and a number of private donors. Other valuable help has come from the Harold B. Lee Library and the College of Fine Arts at BYU, the Wilford Wood Foundation, and the historical departments of both the LDS and RLDS churches.

One of the most significant accomplishments of the critical text project has been the conservation and photographing of the Wilford Wood fragments of the original manuscript. Wilford Wood, a furrier from Bountiful, Utah, was a collector of Mormon artifacts, and one of his most important acquisitions was Lewis Bidamon's remaining fragments from the original manuscript. In 1841 Joseph Smith placed this manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House. In 1882 Lewis Bidamon, Emma Smith's second husband, removed the contents of the cornerstone and discovered that most of the original manuscript had been destroyed by water seepage. Over the next six years Bidamon handed out the larger and better preserved fragments of the manuscript. Most of these larger fragments are now housed in the LDS Church Historical Department

LDS Church Historical Department in Salt Lake City, and account for about 25 percent of the text of the original manuscript. But Bidamon apparently kept for himself some of the smaller fragments. In 1937 Wilford Wood bought these fragments from Charles Bidamon, Lewis's son.

During the summer of 1991 I arranged with the Wilford Wood family to conserve and photograph these fragments. As part of this work I organized at BYU a professional team composed of Robert Espinosa, head of conservation at the Harold B. Lee Library; David Hawkinson, photographer for the Museum of Fine Arts; and myself as editor of the critical text project. On 30 September 1991, Richard Glade, representing the Wilford Wood Foundation, brought the fragments to the BYU library, and Robert Espinosa began the difficult task of separating the fragments, which were compressed together in a lump (see photo 1). Individual fragments, after being separated from the lump, were humidified, unfolded, and flattened. Robert Espinosa was assisted in this work by Cathy Bell and

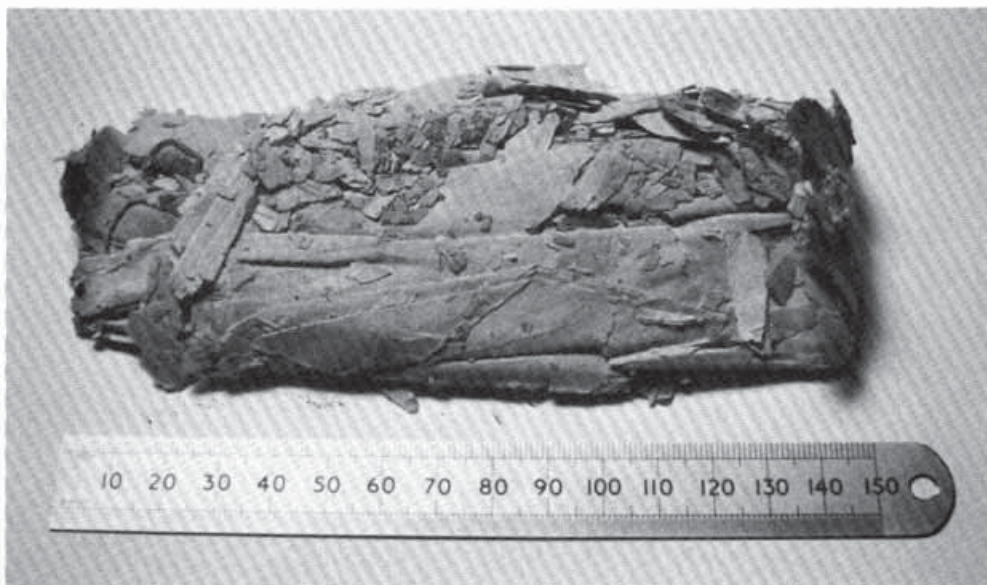


Photo 1. *Lump.*

Pamela Barrios, the two other conservators in the library's conservation lab. David Hawkinson then used various photographic techniques to reveal and document the very faint handwriting on the fragments. Black-and-white ultraviolet reflected photography proved to be the most successful in revealing the faded handwriting. In addition, Robert Espinosa identified the paper type for each fragment, excluding fragments smaller than half a square centimeter. In all he discovered four different kinds of paper for these fragments from the original manuscript. Finally, after encapsulating the fragments in mylar (polyester film), the conservators returned the fragments to the Wilford Wood family. This process took three weeks.

Using the ultraviolet photographs and the computerized scriptures, I have determined that the larger fragments come from six different places in the manuscript: 2 Nephi 5-9; 2 Nephi 23-25; 2 Nephi 33 – Jacob 4; Jacob 5 – Enos; Helaman 13 – 3 Nephi 4; and Ether 3-15. These fragments come from 29 leaves (or 58 pages) of the original manuscript. In all they account for maybe 2-3 percent of the original text. And in each place the handwriting is Oliver Cowdery's.

Since the completion of the conservation I have been working on identifying the smaller fragments. By means of a special computer database, I have been able to identify nearly all the fragments except for the smallest ones plus a few larger illegible fragments that were badly damaged. For the most part I have been able to put together the “puzzle pieces” for these fragments. In addition, I have been working on the facsimile transcript for these reconstructions.

A number of significant findings have come from studying the Wilford Wood fragments. In particular, a few textual changes have been discovered. In producing the printer’s manuscript from the original manuscript, Oliver Cowdery made, on the average, between two and three changes per manuscript page. These changes are, for the most part, simple errors and do not significantly affect the text of the Book of Mormon. The errors frequently occur in groups, which seems to indicate tiring of the scribe. Consider, for instance, a large fragment from 2 Nephi 7:1–8 (see photo 2). In copying this part of the text Oliver Cowdery made six changes:

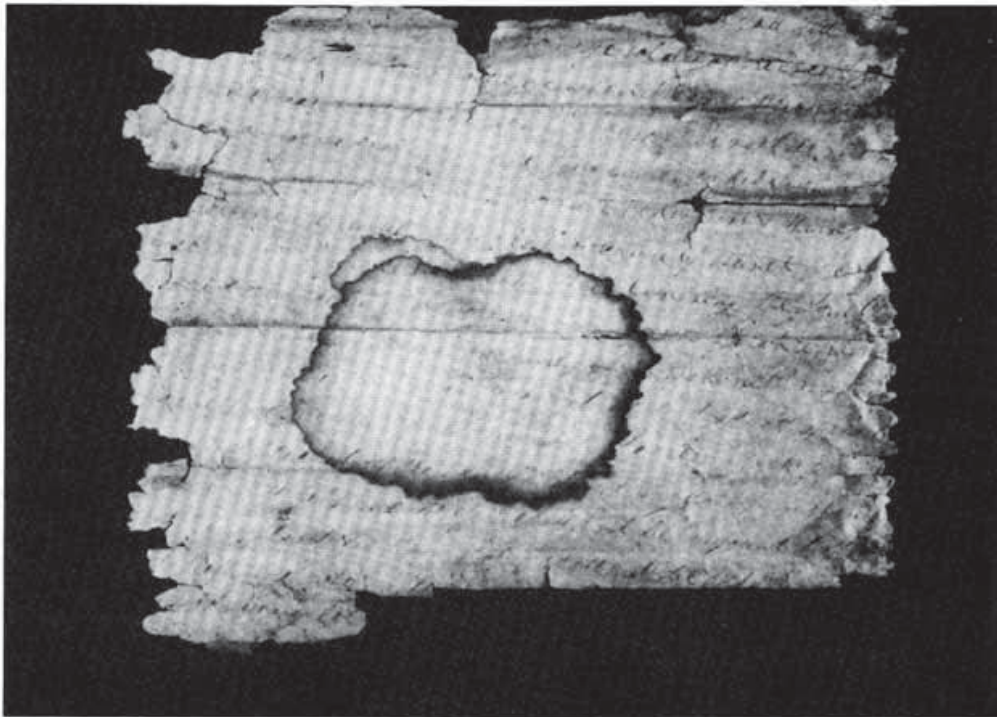


Photo 2. *2 Nephi 7.*

- verse 2: wherefore when I *came* there was no man >
come
 I make *the* rivers a wilderness > *their*
 they *dieth* because of thirst > *die*
- verse 4: he *wakeneth* morning by morning > *waketh*
 he *wakeneth* mine ear > *waketh*
- verse 5: the Lord God hath *opened* mine ear >
appointed

We should note that this passage is quoted from chapter 50 of the book of Isaiah and in the language, of course, of the King James Version. Interestingly, each of the six original readings in this passage is identical with its corresponding reading in the King James Version. In other words, these six changes in the printer's manuscript move the Book of Mormon text further away from the King James text.

All these errors are accidental and introduce only minor changes. Still, two of them, *come* and *appointed*, do create difficult readings. In verse 2, the correct past tense form *came* was restored to the text in the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon. Similarly, in verse 5, the correct verb form *opened* was restored in the 1840 edition, as well as later in the 1879 and all subsequent LDS editions of the Book of Mormon. In the other four examples, the changed form has remained in the text ever since its first appearance in the printer's manuscript.

Another interesting find from the Wilford Wood fragments is that we have the top outer corner for two leaves (from Jacob 6 through Enos 1). Page numbers appear here, namely from 111 through 114. Corresponding pages in the printer's manuscript are numbered from 107 through 111. Normally, each page in the original manuscript has a heading at the top of the page which briefly describes the page content. Such headings appear in the first half of 1 Nephi and in extant portions of Alma and Helaman. But these headings are missing in the second half of

1 Nephi and in two extant pages from the beginning of 2 Nephi. And they are also missing here in these fragments from Jacob and Enos.

There is clear evidence in the original manuscript that Joseph Smith, as part of the translation process, could see the English spelling of names. Witnesses to the translation indicated that Joseph would sometimes spell out names so that the scribe could get them down correctly. Frequently, in the original manuscript, when a Book of Mormon name first occurs (or has not occurred for some time), that name is first written out in a more phonetic but incorrect spelling, then this incorrect spelling is crossed out and the correct spelling immediately follows. For instance, in Alma 33:15 Oliver Cowdery first spells the prophet Zenoch's name as *Zenock*, then he crosses out the whole name and rewrites it with a *ch* at the end rather than a *ck*, thus indicating that the correct spelling is *Zenoch* (as in *Enoch*). Similarly, in Helaman 1:15 Oliver ends *Coriantumr* with the spelling *-tummer*, then he crosses out the whole name and follows it with the correct spelling, which ends with *-tumr*, an impossible spelling for English. And in the Wilford Wood fragments we find another example. In Ether 13:27, the place name *Gilgal* is first written by Oliver Cowdery with two *l*'s at the end of the word, then the second *l* is carefully crossed out. Since either spelling is theoretically possible, it appears that once more Oliver had to ask Joseph how to spell an unfamiliar name.

One group of fragments from the Wilford Wood collection form the gutters (that is, the inner fold) for a gathering of sheets from Ether. In the original lump, these fragments had been twisted into a roll. Attached to the roll was a piece of the original thread that had been used to hold the sheets of the gathering together (see photo 3). Reconstruction of these fragments demonstrates that originally there were at least four sheets in this gathering.

This gathering follows Oliver Cowdery's typical sequence for producing a gathering. The sheets were first ruled and then

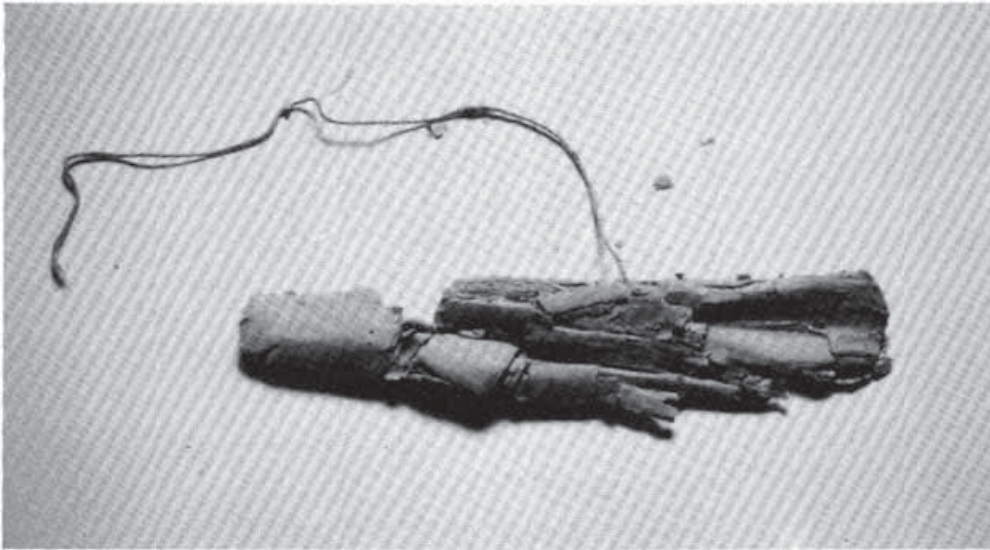


Photo 3. *Roll.*

folded once, but only later—after Oliver had finished writing down the text—were the stab marks and the thread itself added to produce the sewn gathering. Evidence for this production sequence can be found from the center sheet of the Ether gathering. On the inner side of this sheet (unlike all other extant gatherings of either manuscript) Oliver Cowdery wrote all the way across the whole sheet. Words are written without break right across the gutters—and without smearing, thus showing that the gathering had not yet been sewn together.

Finally, the Wilford Wood fragments give strong evidence that for 72 pages the original manuscript rather than the printer's manuscript was used as the printer's copy for typesetting the 1830 edition. I first discovered this at the LDS Church Historical Department when I noticed a fragment from 3 Nephi 26–27 covered with printer's marks. Both the original and printer's manuscripts, when first written down, had very little punctuation. The Palmyra printer frequently added punctuation marks to his copy in order to help him typeset the 1830 edition. About a third of the pages in the printer's manuscript are covered with these printer's marks, mostly in pencil. The fact that a fragment from the original manuscript has these same pencil marks indicates that the original must have been used at least once as the printer's copy during the printing process.

Additional evidence for this use of the original manuscript can be found in the 1830 edition itself. For instance, in *Mormon* the name *Cumorah* is consistently misspelled as *Camorah*, yet the printer's manuscript (in an unknown scribe's hand) shows a clear *u* for the spelling of the first vowel of *Cumorah*. On the other hand, throughout both manuscripts Oliver Cowdery frequently makes his *a*'s like *u*'s and vice versa. This scribal characteristic of his could well serve as the source for the misspelled *Camorah*, but only if the manuscript source for *Mormon* in the 1830 edition is the original manuscript (and presumably in Oliver Cowdery's hand).

In April 1991, when I was able to work directly on the printer's manuscript at the RLDS Auditorium in Independence, Missouri, I discovered that for 72 pages of that manuscript, from Helaman 13 through *Mormon*, there is no sign that those pages were used as the printer's copy. Unlike surrounding gatherings of the printer's manuscript, the four gatherings for these 72 pages are not cut up nor are there any printer's marks. The threads that originally held these four gatherings together were removed only a few decades ago, and thus stains from those threads are clearly visible in the folds of these four gatherings. Since such stains do not appear on any of the other gatherings in the printer's manuscript, presumably their threads were removed soon after arriving at the Palmyra printer's shop, especially since so many of those sheets were cut up to facilitate the typesetting.

The Wilford Wood fragments provide important support for this extensive use of the original manuscript as the printer's copy. Large fragments from Helaman 13-15 clearly show the penciled printer's marks. Similar marks also appear on smaller fragments from the beginning of 3 Nephi. This evidence is important for establishing the degree to which the original manuscript was used as the printer's copy.

We may ask why the original manuscript was used for this purpose. One possible explanation is that the brethren responsible for producing the printer's manuscript fell behind in their

copy work. Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and Hyrum Smith were not only responsible for making the copy, but also for overseeing its use at the printer's shop. Their responsibilities included proofing the typeset sheets (according to John Gilbert, one of the 1830 compositors). In order to meet the printer's demands for more copy, it was apparently decided to take in the original manuscript rather than having the presswork stop. Presumably, these brethren no longer felt any great risk in bringing in the original manuscript since they had finished about three fourths of the typesetting without any problems of theft. In any event, they still attempted to catch up in their copy work and finally had Oliver Cowdery and another scribe (not yet identified) work together on the printer's manuscript. Apparently, Oliver had been able to complete the printer's manuscript up through 3 Nephi 19. The unknown scribe then continued the work from there while Oliver started on Ether. When this unknown scribe finally finished Mormon, he left the rest of the page blank. This nearly blank page is the last page of a short gathering of four sheets. Nowhere else in any of the manuscripts is there any page left partially blank; except for here, the scribe always begins the following book on the very next line. This hiatus at the end of Mormon strongly supports the hypothesis that in the printer's manuscript Ether was begun before the copying of Mormon was finished.

This partial use of the original manuscript as the printer's copy is very significant for the critical text project. For about 85 percent of the Book of Mormon, there is only one first-hand copy of the original manuscript; namely, the printer's manuscript. For this portion of the text, the 1830 edition is a copy of the printer's manuscript and is thus twice removed from the original manuscript. But for 15 percent of the text, from Helaman 13 to the end of Mormon, we have two first-hand copies of the original manuscript; namely, the printer's manuscript and the 1830 edition.

We have relatively little of the original manuscript for this portion, but we can compare the two first-hand copies with each

NORMAL STEMMA	EXCEPTIONAL STEMMA
<p style="text-align: center;">85% OF THE TEXT</p> <p style="text-align: center;">O</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;">P</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1830</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 Nephi 1 - Hela 13 Ether 1 - Moroni 10</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">15% OF THE TEXT</p> <p style="text-align: center;">O</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↙ ↘</p> <p style="text-align: center;">P 1830</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Hela 13 - Mormon 9</p>

other. In most cases the printer’s manuscript and the 1830 edition will agree, and we can be fairly confident that this common reading accurately reflects the reading of the original manuscript. In fact, consistency of the common reading can be tested, to some degree, by comparing it with what remains of the original manuscript. On the other hand, whenever the printer’s manuscript and the 1830 edition disagree in these 72 pages, we can be fairly sure that one of the readings represents the original reading, but of course the problem here will be to determine which one is the right one. Nonetheless, we are delighted to be given two possibilities instead of just one.

These are some of the important findings from our work with the Wilford Wood fragments. I would like to express my thanks to the Wilford Wood family for their graciousness in allowing us access to these fragments as well as permission to reproduce the photographs in this article. In addition, I am especially grateful for such colleagues as Robert Espinosa and David Hawkinson, who took the photographs and made it such a joy to work on the Wilford Wood fragments. I have also received a good deal of personal satisfaction in working on this project. My own professional work had led me to study a

number of different academic areas without me ever suspecting that these diverse fields would all come together in my work on the text of the Book of Mormon.

There has also been a spiritual dimension to this work. My own testimony of the Book of Mormon is not based on my work on the critical text, but rather on my own personal witness of some 15 years ago that this book records events which actually happened. Nonetheless, it has been a delight to have discovered evidence in the original manuscript to support what witnesses said about how Joseph Smith translated. The Book of Mormon is truly “a marvelous work and a wonder,” and there is direct textual evidence that it is a revelation from the Lord.