

The Original Text of the Book of Mormon and its Publication by Yale University Press

Royal Skousen, Editor of the Book of Mormon Critical Text
Project and Professor of Linguistics and English Language at
Brigham Young University

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In this paper I discuss the work of the Book of Mormon critical text project and the attempt to restore and publish the original text of the Book of Mormon. I've been working on the critical text project from 1988 up to the present, and thus far ten books have been published as part of this project.

Major Findings of the Critical Text Project

There are two main goals in this critical text project. The first is to restore by scholarly means, to the extent possible, the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon. This original language text is, I believe, what Joseph Smith received through a physical instrument – either the Nephite interpreters (later called the Urim and Thummim) or the seer stone – and read off to scribes. The second goal of the critical text project is

to determine the history of the Book of Mormon text, in particular the kind of changes that it has undergone, both accidental and editorial. Most of the editorial changes have been of a grammatical nature.

The largest part of the work in recovering the original text involves two manuscripts. The most important of these is the original manuscript (O), the one that Joseph Smith dictated to his scribes. The other manuscript is called the printer's manuscript (P), and it is a copy of the original manuscript. This second manuscript is the one that was prepared to take to the Palmyra, New York, printer E. B. Grandin in 1829-30 to set the type. In addition to the two manuscripts, I have considered 20 printed editions of the Book of Mormon in the critical text project: 15 LDS editions, one private edition from 1858 (the Wright edition), and four RLDS editions (the RLDS Church is now known as the Community of Christ).

Approximately 28 percent of the original manuscript is extant. (In calculating this percentage, I exclude the 116 pages that were lost by Martin Harris in 1828.) In 1841 Joseph Smith placed the original manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, a hotel being built in Nauvoo. The manuscript lay there in the cornerstone for the next 41 years until in 1882 Lewis Bidamon, the second husband of Emma Smith's, after her death, retrieved the manuscript. Most of it was severely damaged by water that had seeped in; much of it had been eaten away by mold.

Bidamon gave most of the larger manuscript portions to LDS people. As a result, 25 of that 28 percent has ended up in the archives of the LDS Church. The LDS portions cover from 1 Nephi 2 to 2 Nephi 1, from Alma 22 to Alma 60, and from Alma 62 to Helaman 3, and include other minor fragments. There is also half a leaf at the University of Utah (from 1 Nephi 14). And the equivalent of a leaf in fragments is held privately (from Alma 58 to Alma 60).

Of great importance for this project has been the discovery of two percent of the text that Wilford Wood, a collector from Bountiful, Utah, bought from Charles Bidamon, the son of Lewis Bidamon, in 1937. The majority of the Wilford Wood fragments are found in three parts of the text:

from 2 Nephi 5 to Enos 1, from Helaman 13 to 3 Nephi 4, and from Ether 3 to Ether 15.

We will now have a look at some of the Wilford Wood fragments. We begin with the lump of fragments as they were observed on 30 September 1991, at the beginning of the conservation of these fragments:



At the time we couldn't be sure if this really was the original manuscript, or what it might be. But it turned out, for the most part, to be from the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon.

Next we see Robert Espinosa, then the head of conservation at BYU's Harold B. Lee Library, beginning the very difficult task of teasing apart these fragments:



Now consider one of the more interesting fragments found in this lump. This is how it appeared when first removed from the lump, all rolled up:

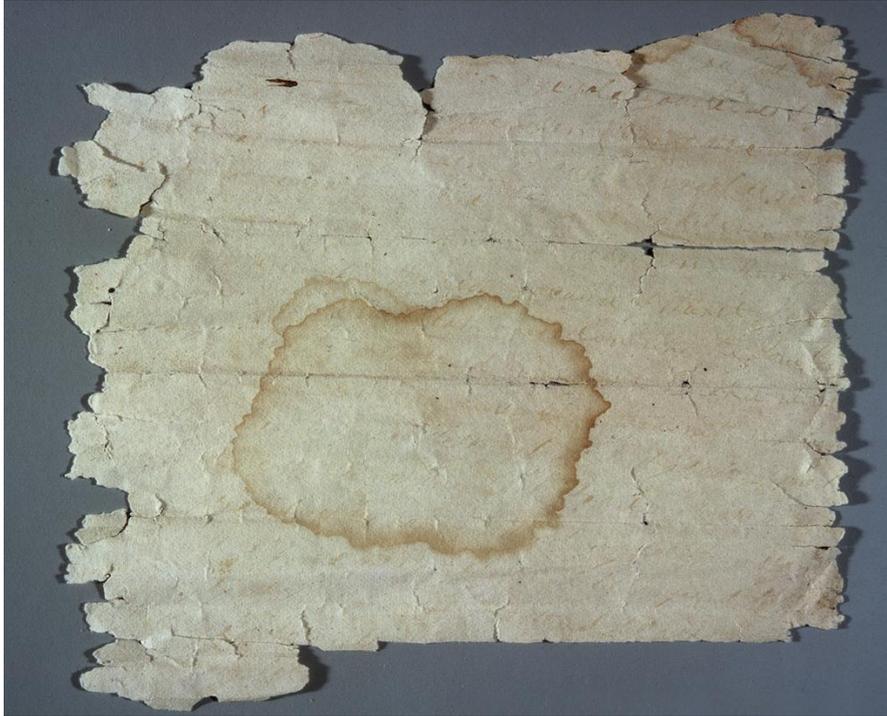


After it was unraveled, we could see the uneven edges where mold had eaten away parts of the leaf:

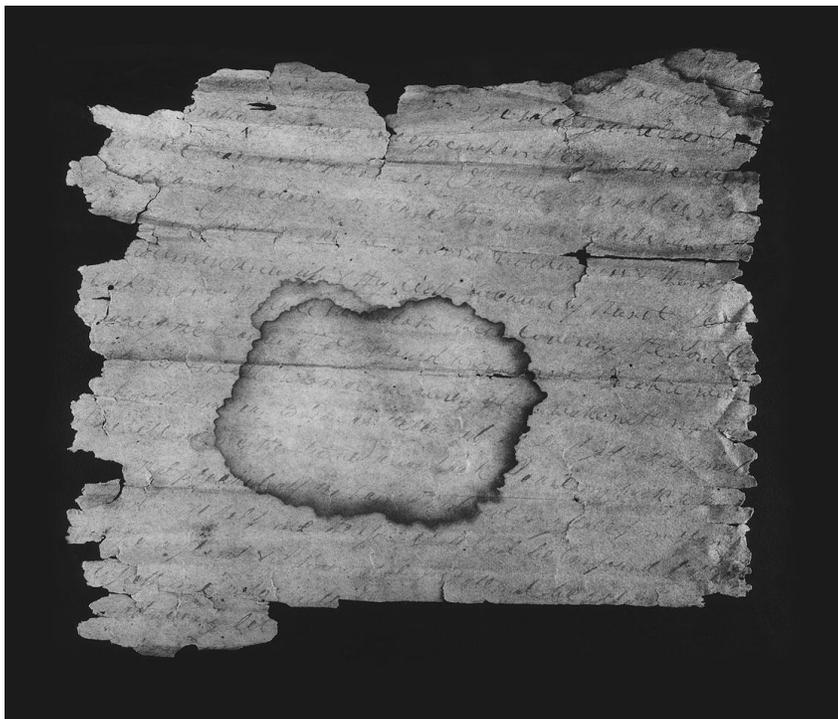


In addition, there was a large water stain in the center of the fragment, resulting from the water that had gotten into the cornerstone.

After the fragment was leveled and photographed, we could basically see what was there:



The text for this fragment is in the hand of Oliver Cowdery; the ink was originally black and has turned brown over time. We found that black and white ultraviolet photography brought out the text best of all:



This fragment of the original manuscript comes from 2 Nephi 7-8. When Oliver copied this particular portion of the text into the printer's manuscript, he made six changes, of which five were accidental. For this part of the text, he was copying an Isaiah quotation, which is difficult enough. Even so, the relatively high number of errors for this single page was unusual for Oliver; he was probably getting tired as he was making the copy here. But it also turns out that he made one conscious change here, a grammatical one, when he changed *they dieth* to *they die* as he copied the text into the printer's manuscript.