

Defending the Faith: Is the English Book of Mormon written in Joseph Smith's language?

By [Daniel Peterson](#)

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Theories of the origin of the Book of Mormon abound. (See my 2004 essay “‘In the Hope That Something Will Stick’: Changing Explanations for the Book of Mormon,” online at publications.mi.byu.edu.) Those who reject it typically say that the translator Joseph Smith wrote it himself, or that he plagiarized it from the work of some other roughly contemporary person or persons.

Such theories have recently been challenged by the extraordinary ongoing research of linguists Royal Skousen and Stanford Carmack, which seems to demonstrate the existence in the Book of Mormon elements of Early Modern English that cannot be fully explained even by borrowing from the King James Bible, let alone by referring to the 19th-century English spoken by Joseph and his contemporaries. Skeptics who dismiss the Book of Mormon’s style as “just Joseph, trying to sound scriptural,” now face a bigger hurdle than they had realized.

Even believers in the Book of Mormon differ in their views of its translation and of the relationship between the Prophet Joseph Smith and the original text. A common explanation offered by faithful scholars has held that Joseph came via revelation to a miraculous understanding of the content of the golden plates; he then expressed that understanding in his own language, albeit in a manner heavily affected by the grand, archaic style of King James’ early-17th-century Bible translators.

However, in a new article published in “Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture” — full disclosure: I’m the Interpreter Foundation’s chairman and president — under the title “[How Joseph Smith’s Grammar Differed from Book of Mormon Grammar](#): Evidence from the 1832 History” (online at mormoninterpreter.com), Carmack presents further evidence suggesting that the language of the Book of Mormon is not that of the Prophet Joseph.

He compares the Book of Mormon to one of our earliest specimens of Joseph Smith's style, his 1832 autobiographical "[History](#)." (The document, nearly 2,000 words long, is available for reading online at [josephsmithpapers.org](#).) A third of it was written by Frederick G. Williams at Joseph's dictation; the rest is in Joseph's own hand. Carmack concentrates on three archaic and nonbiblical linguistic features that occur quite frequently in the Book of Mormon, concluding that, although there was ample opportunity for their use in the 1832 "History," they don't occur in it.

The "History," says Carmack, manifests linguistic features that we would expect to see in a text coming from its background in the early American Republic. Thus, it differs substantially from the Book of Mormon. In Carmack's judgment, "This provides support for the view that English words were actually transmitted in some way to Joseph in 1829, words that he then dictated to scribes" — and, if true, counts as evidence against not only the skeptical claim that the Book of Mormon was altogether composed by Joseph Smith or some rather obscure contemporary or group of contemporaries, but also against the notion that Joseph clothed a divinely delivered understanding of the contents of the golden plates in his own language.

Carmack acknowledges that further study of Joseph's language, based upon larger samples of it, would be helpful, and hints that this may yet be done. Nonetheless, he argues, the 1832 "History" offers a very useful glance into Joseph's linguistic preferences and habits, and specifically into his grammar, at a time not too far removed from the dictation of the Book of Mormon, which makes comparison between the two texts meaningful and significant.

With this article, Carmack deepens and solidifies one of the arguments that he and Skousen have been making with meticulous care, on the basis of objectively "observable, descriptive linguistic facts: the earliest text of the Book of Mormon contains a large amount of archaic language — vocabulary, syntax and morphology — that is not found, either systematically or at all, in 19th-century American dialect or in the King James Bible. Massively represented syntax supports independent instances of archaic, extra-

biblical vocabulary. Obsolete lexical usage supports the descriptive linguistic conclusion that there is archaic, extra-biblical syntax and morphology.”

All of which, among other things, comes together to suggest, in a manner nobody had imagined even a few years ago, that neither Joseph Smith nor any of his contemporaries wrote the Book of Mormon.

Information about Skousen and Carmack and links to the work that they’ve published in “Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture” on this and other topics can be found at

mormoninterpreter.com/author/royals/ and at mormoninterpreter.com/author/stanfordc/. Videos of their relevant presentations can be viewed, along with others, at mormoninterpreter.com/category/videos/.

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