Defending the Faith: The very surprising language of the Book of Mormon

By Daniel Peterson
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Seeming "errors in grammar and diction," particularly in the earliest manuscripts and first printed edition of the English Book of Mormon, have provided merriment for mocking critics since at least 1830.

Recent scholarly study of the book's textual history, however, suggests that such derisive criticism is fundamentally misguided. Indeed, it may even demonstrate that, here as elsewhere, apparently "weak things" can "become strong" for those who believe (see Ether 12:27).
The pioneering research of Royal Skousen, a professor of English language and linguistics at Brigham Young University, for example, extending now over nearly three decades, provides arresting evidence that significant portions of the vocabulary of the Book of Mormon derive from the 1500s and the 1600s, and not, as one might expect, from the 1800s. Further, his latest studies have refined those dates even more exactly, showing that the vocabulary and meanings of many words in the text date from the 1540s up to about 1740. To put it another way, some Book of Mormon vocabulary reflects a period not only prior to the birth of Joseph Smith but also prior to the publication of the King James Bible in 1611.

Arguing along parallel lines, an important new article entitled "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar" has just appeared in "Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture" (online at mormoninterpreter.com). Linguist Stanford Carmack builds upon Skousen's work, and, indeed, bases his analysis upon Skousen's 2009 Yale University Press edition of "The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text," but focuses on grammar and syntax rather than on vocabulary. Carmack shows that much of what has been dismissed as incorrect in the language of the Book of Mormon isn't actually wrong. To the contrary (while considering dozens of such "obvious"

grammatical "howlers" as "in them days," "I had smote" versus "I had smitten" and "they was yet wroth"), he maintains that the book's language is "excellent and even sophisticated."

It simply isn't the Modern English that we typically use today.

And this, for my present purposes, is the crucial point: "It's important and helpful to bear in mind," Carmack writes, "that the original Book of Mormon language is, generally speaking, only nonstandard from our standpoint, centuries after the Elizabethan era, which appears to be the epicenter of the book's syntax."

Now, think about that statement. Let it sink in, because its implications are stunning.

Carmack argues that, especially when the textual "corrections" of the past nearly two centuries have been stripped away — emendations and "improvements" intended to bring the published Book of Mormon into conformity with modern standards of usage — the grammar found in the book offers extensive evidence of its Early Modern English character. The original English Book of Mormon is, he says, "in large part" an Early Modern English text, "even reaching back in time to the transition period" from late Middle English into Early Modern English. "The correspondences are plentiful and plain."

Let me translate those terms into readily comprehensible dates: Some scholars assign Early Modern English to the period between A.D. 1470 and 1670, while others prefer the rounder, neater 1500-1700. As for late Middle English, it's typically said to have begun in the early 1300s and to have reached its end sometime in the late 1400s. (Geoffrey Chaucer, author of the famous "Canterbury Tales," was born in 1343 and died in 1400.) Some grammatical features of the Book of Mormon, Carmack contends, reach back to that time. The "Elizabethan era," which Carmack says "appears to be the epicenter" of English Book of Mormon syntax and which is often viewed as a "golden age' in English history and literature — for the most part, it's also the age of Shakespeare — covers the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, from 1558 to 1603.

"Therefore," Carmack writes, "in view of the totality of the evidence adduced here, I would assert that it is no longer possible to argue that the earliest text of the Book of Mormon is defective and substandard in its grammar. … It clearly draws on a wide array of … language forms and syntax from the Early Modern English period, some of them obscure and inaccessible to virtually everyone 200 years ago. Only now are we beginning to appreciate the book's surprising linguistic depth and breadth."

What does this all mean? If Skousen and Carmack are right, believers in the Book of Mormon's miraculous origin have solid grounds for surprise. Those who regard Joseph Smith as the book's author, however, should feel challenged and deeply perplexed.

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