

Abstract: *Comments made by Philip Barlow on Book of Mormon language for an Oxford-published book are examined. Inaccuracies are pointed out, and some examples are given that show matching with 1611 King James usage as well as with other earlier usage. One important conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that those who wish to critique the English language of the Book of Mormon need to take the subject more seriously and approach it with genuine scholarship, instead of repeating earlier errors. This has a direct bearing on forming accurate views of Joseph Smith and Book of Mormon translation.*

There are some errors which is easilier persuaded unto than to some truths.

Henry, Earl of Monmouth (translator)¹

Most LDS scholars have not carefully investigated Book of Mormon grammar before passing judgment. As a result, this is an area where error and misinformation abound. Even now, few take the trouble to study the earliest textual usage systematically. Work performed in this area by most researchers is done piecemeal and superficially. This has consequences for understanding the text.

Many have accepted and furthered the view that Joseph Smith was the English-language translator, chiefly because of perceived bad grammar. This currently dominant view, however, is greatly weakened because virtually all of its “bad grammar” is attested in literate writings [Page 186]of the past. Furthermore, there is a significant amount of suspect grammar found in the earliest text of the Book of Mormon that does not appear to have been the kind of grammar that Joseph Smith knew or would have used.

To be clear, however, the determination that suspect grammar is well-formed is not primary. First and foremost, descriptive linguistic studies show that the Book of Mormon contains a host of archaic and extra-biblical forms, constructions, and vocabulary items, and many of these do not fall into the category of potential bad grammar. All this evidence means that the earliest text is not pseudo-archaic, which in turn has explanatory power vis-à-vis questionable grammar. With the passage of time and a greater availability of external textual evidence, an ungrammatical view of Book of Mormon language will become increasingly anti-intellectual.

There is plenty of published opinion on Book of Mormon language that is largely inaccurate. For almost two centuries, writers have not felt a need to know or study past English usage or to be sufficiently and competently trained in English linguistic analysis before passing judgment on Book of Mormon usage. This is a call for all students of Book of Mormon grammar to begin to take the matter more seriously and carefully.

Present-day English intuitions about past usage as well as biblically derived grammatical perceptions can be entirely misleading. Consequently, not only must we reject and discard the grammatical opinions that have been made by many non-Mormon and anti-Mormon critics with respect to Book of Mormon usage, but we must also reject and discard the grammatical opinions made by many prominent LDS scholars.

Barlow’s Comments

Philip L. Barlow — who recently directed a conference titled “New Perspectives on Joseph Smith and Translation” at Utah State University (16 March 2017) — wrote the following about Book of Mormon language:

Like other translators of ancient texts and following the precedent set with earlier revelations, Smith cast the book into seventeenth-century prose, though his own vocabulary and grammar are evident throughout. Because Jacobean speech was not his native idiom, he sometimes rendered the style inexpertly: “ye” (properly a subject) sometimes lapsed into “you” (object) as the subject of a sentence, as in Mosiah 2:19; an Elizabethan suffix attached to some verbs but was inconsistently

omitted from others (“yields ... putteth,” Mosiah 3:19). Much of this [Page 187]strained language was refined in the second edition (Kirtland, Ohio, 1837). The preface, for instance, was changed from its 1830 rendering, “... now if there be fault, it be the mistake of men.” Similarly, some 227 appearances of “saith” were changed to “said.”²

This quotation differs slightly from the first edition reading,³ telling us that Barlow reviewed and modified this paragraph for the 2013 edition. With the help of the Oxford English Dictionary, we can take the meaning of the adjective *strained* as used in this context to mean that Joseph Smith employed language “in a laboured, far-fetched, or non-natural” way.⁴

Despite Oxford’s mission to “[further an] objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education,”⁵ much of this Barlow quotation is, lamentably, inaccurate. Although he is correct in saying Jacobean speech wasn’t Joseph’s native idiom, Barlow didn’t research 1611 King James grammar before criticizing Book of Mormon usage, and he didn’t consult text-critical materials for his updated edition of 2013, when oversights could have been more easily avoided. Because Barlow’s observations are taken by many to be accurate, this book contributes to misperceptions about Book of Mormon language.

Critique of Barlow’s Comments

First, the earliest revelations that Joseph Smith received — at least those meant for broad publication — were of the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, it is highly likely the language of the 1828 dictation was similar to the extant translation of Mormon’s abridgment. Thus the dictation of the text of the Book of Mormon in 1828 and 1829 came before and at the same time as early Doctrine and Covenants revelations; [Page 188]it did not come after. In this way Barlow’s mention of “earlier revelations” isn’t accurate. Most readers are left with the wrong impression of things.

The three earliest Doctrine and Covenants revelations were given between the dictation of the 116 lost manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon and the dictation of the text that would be published in 1830. Other slightly later Doctrine and Covenants revelations were given not earlier than the 1829 dictation of the Book of Mormon.⁶

Second, the statement that Joseph’s “own vocabulary and grammar are evident throughout” is a mischaracterization. In the ten years before 2013, Royal Skousen published a variety of material on archaic lexical usage found in the dictation of the Book of Mormon that Joseph Smith probably wasn’t familiar with.⁷ This lexical evidence was available to Barlow and could have been noted. In addition, John A. Widtsoe had written in 1951 “that the vocabulary of the Book of Mormon appear[ed] to be far beyond that of an unlettered youth.”⁸ Barlow doesn’t convey or discuss this reality either.

Moreover, digital databases demonstrate that the earliest text of the Book of Mormon contains an abundance of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century grammatical usage that often does not overlap with King James idiom. Thus Book of Mormon grammar was effectively foreign to Joseph Smith’s own grammar. Some of it is fairly common, but some of it is rather obscure and compelling, since a non-specialist in the early nineteenth century (someone who wasn’t an English philologist) wouldn’t have been able to make so many matches — both systematically and individually — with earlier usage.

Third, Barlow gives a naïve view of subject *ye* ~ *you* usage. This ultimately follows from a received view of Book of Mormon translation, which is the foundational assumption that Barlow operates from (this assumption is laid out below). Interestingly, he follows the generally [Page 189]accepted view of Book of Mormon translation even though the opposing view — the textually more likely view — makes very good sense of data that he discusses on following pages.

According to a large database of Early Modern English, subject *you* had become the preferred form no later than the year 1570.⁹ Consequently, subject *you* is found throughout the 1611 King James Bible. Only in later printings is

it rarely found.¹⁰ Here is an example of nearby subject *ye* ~ *you* variation taken from the 1611 Bible, with the original spelling retained and bolding added:

Job 19:3

These tenne times haue **ye** reproched me:
you are not ashamed that **you** make your selues strange to me.

1769 reading: These ten times have **ye** reproched me:
ye are not ashamed *that ye* make yourselves strange to me.

In Job 19:3 we see subject *ye* and subject *you* used very close together. There are a number of instances of this in the 1611 Bible and in the earliest text of the Book of Mormon, as in the following examples:

Mosiah 5:15

that **you** may be brought to heaven,
 that **ye** may have everlasting salvation and eternal life

Alma 7:6

Yea, I trust that **you** do not worship idols,
 but that **ye** do worship the true and the living God

This was typical usage of earlier English, clearly shown by *ye* occurring within nine words of “that you” more than 1,000 times in EEBO Phase 1 texts (see note 9). This nearby variation of subject *ye* ~ *you* occurs at a slightly higher rate in sixteenth-century writings, but there are more than 750 seventeenth century examples of it in EEBO Phase 1 texts. Thus it is something found in writing throughout the Early Modern English period.

Fourth, Barlow mentions the *yields* ~ *putteth* inflectional variation currently found at Mosiah 3:19. But the modern form, *yields*, was introduced by Joseph Smith in 1837, marked by him in the printer’s manuscript.¹¹ (This appears to have been an unnecessary, entirely [Page 190]optional edit; the dictated form was *yieldeth*.) For the 2013 edition, Barlow could have easily checked whether a modernizing edit had been made at Mosiah 3:19, but he didn’t. Nor did he point out the obsolete *but if* = “unless” occurring just before “he yieldeth.” Lexical usage such as *but if* dismisses Barlow’s observation about vocabulary and weakens his foundational assumption (see below).

Suppose the *yields* ~ *putteth* inflectional variation had been original to the earliest text of the Book of Mormon — a reasonable consideration since this kind of variation is found elsewhere in the text. As it turns out, seventeenth-century writings have the same nearby variation:

1637, William Camden, *Britain*

Of joy and mirth the gladsome signes it **putteth** forth at last.
 And now her ancient honour she doth vaunt in happy plight,
 When to her Sovereigne Lord she **yeelds** all service due by right.

1681, Thomas Frankland, *The annals of King James and*

King Charles the First

as in the other Cases where the Law **putteth** the King to any particular charge for the protection of the Subject,
it always enables him thereto, **yields** him particular supplies of money for the maintenance of the charge:

And here is a rare example from the 1611 King James Bible in which {-s} inflection varies closely with {-th} inflection:

1 Esdras 4:21

He **stickes** not to spend his life with his wife,
and **remembreth** neither father, nor mother, nor countrey.

This is from the Apocrypha;
the verse is shown here in the original spelling.

In this verse “he sticks” is followed by “and [he] remembereth.” We find similar examples of nearby variation in the Book of Mormon, sometimes with the same verb:

Omni 1:25

for there is nothing which is good save it **comes** from the Lord;
and that which is evil **cometh** from the devil.

This inflectional variation remains in the current LDS text.

Here is an example of this same inflectional variation with the same verb, from an important seventeenth-century author who wrote the influential and widely read book titled *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

1669, John Bunyan, *The Holy City*

Gold, as it **comes** from the mine,
it **cometh** commixed with its dust and ore;

[Page 191]From this type of evidence we learn that nearby variation of {-s} and {-th} inflection was part of Early Modern English usage and was even rarely employed in the 1611 Bible.¹² As English changed over decades and centuries, there was a huge amount of closely occurring inflectional variation. Because of phonology, syntax, and other factors, usage could be quite variable. So it's incorrect to think that the variation was somehow defective. In fact, it is axiomatic that variation is characteristic of natural language and that it does not necessarily equate with ungrammaticality.¹³ (This can be verified generally by studying large textual databases or even smaller corpora of

the writings of individual authors.)

In English, once {-th} inflection passed from general use, remaining only in exceptional cases, the notion took over among those predisposed to make black-and-white grammatical rules that inflectional variation was strained grammar. These prescriptivist views have been used by Barlow and others to critique Book of Mormon grammar.

The thinking may have proceeded along these lines:

- Joseph Smith was responsible for the English language of the earliest text of the Book of Mormon.
- Joseph Smith didn't know there was closely occurring third-person singular {-s} ~ {-th} variation in earlier English; or, earlier English didn't have closely occurring third person singular {-s} ~ {-th} variation.
- Therefore, closely occurring inflectional {-s} ~ {-th} variation in the Book of Mormon is defective.

The first item is foundational to Barlow's view, but it is a premature assumption. Scholars must carefully study the form and structure of Book of Mormon language before making such a judgment. Most don't undertake such study; instead, they follow ideology or prior, inexpert opinions.

Joseph didn't know a lot of the archaic semantic and syntactic usage of the earliest text. For instance, external textual evidence indicates that he wasn't familiar with *but if* = 'unless,' *counsel the Lord* = 'consult the Lord' (Alma 37:37), *the waters departed* = 'the waters divided' (Helaman 8:11), [Page 192] and *whereby* = 'why?' (Ether 8:9) (see note 7). And he wasn't familiar with high-rate, non-emphatic *did*-periphrasis of the sixteenth century, yet there it is in the Book of Mormon.¹⁴

Archaic, extra-biblical grammar found throughout the Book of Mormon argues strongly against the generally accepted assumption that Joseph could have been responsible for the English-language text. Systematic, extra-biblical Book of Mormon language importantly includes (but is not limited to) the core of grammar: the present-tense verbal system, the past-tense verbal system, the perfect-tense verbal system, and the future-tense verbal system. All these are genuinely archaic but unlike King James idiom in a variety of ways.¹⁵

Fifth, Joseph Smith didn't refine the language of the Book of Mormon in 1837; he attempted to modernize the text, and his editing was inconsistent.¹⁶ Changing *yieldeth* to *yields* in Mosiah 3:19 is obviously one instance of that. It isn't difficult to argue from examples that he even occasionally eliminated some beautiful aspects of the text. As a linguist who considers a multitude of prior usage, I happen to find syntactically mediated subject-verb agreement variation quite interesting and unobjectionable. Most of these have been eliminated, and many by Joseph himself. Here is an example of that:

Alma 57:36

Yea, and I trust that the souls of **them which has** been slain **have** entered into the rest of their God.

The "which has" was changed to "who have" in 1837.¹⁷

The same kind of syntactically influenced *has* ~ *have* variation is found in the seventeenth century:

1681, Roger L'Estrange [1616–1704], *The character of a papist in masquerade*, page 66 [EEBO A47819]

the whole strain of **them that has** been taken off by the hand of Justice, . . . **have** so behaved

themselves at the last cast,

Larger context: “And it is not to say, that this is the transport of a *mad man*; but it is the effort of the very Principle, and the whole strain of them that has been taken off by the hand of Justice, (not for *treasonous words* neither, but *actual rebellions*) have so behaved themselves at the last cast, as if the [Page 193]whole Schism were upon a vie who should damn bravest.”

These examples exhibit nearby verb agreement variation in the same sentence. In the latter part of the Early Modern English period, plural *has* (along with plural *hath*, etc.) was relatively favored after relative pronouns, but even in those contexts plural *has* was not common. In the above examples, this underlying tendency is expressed overtly. The usual verb form *have* occurs outside of the relative clause, as the head of a predicate whose complex subject contains the exceptional verb form *has*.

Sometimes Joseph Smith reduced overall textual consistency in his 1837 editing, as in the following example:

1 Nephi 15:13?[1830 edition: page 36, line 16]

after **that** the Messiah **hath manifested himself**
in body unto the children of men,

changed to

after the Messiah **shall be manifested**
in body unto the children of men,

The deletion of archaic *that*, though unnecessary, is hardly objectionable. But Joseph also changed active, reflexive “hath manifested himself” to passive “shall be manifested” in his 1837 editing. The passive switch is contraindicated, as shown by internal textual comparison: “everywhere else the text says that the Savior will ‘manifest himself’ (23 times), never that the Savior will ‘be manifested.’?”¹⁸

Sixth, the title page’s “if there be fault, it **be** the mistake of men” is an example of contextually influenced subjunctive, since we don’t find “it be” without a governing subjunctive trigger elsewhere in the earliest text. The “it be” follows from the influence of a preceding subjunctive form — in this case, the *be* of “if there be.” Here is a likely seventeenth-century example, since “it be” is in a resultative clause not directly governed by the hypothetical:

1629, Lancelot Andrewes (died 1626), *Sermons*

But, **if there be** no cause, and so **it be** in vaine, *I joy therein and will joy.*

Italics in the original; bolding added.

[Page 194]This English bishop and scholar oversaw part of the translation of the King James Bible. He was the chief of the Westminster Translators and director of the First Westminster Committee, responsible for the translation of Genesis to 2 Kings. The above usage by Andrewes was not illiterate or strained; by extension, neither

is that of the Book of Mormon.

In the next example, a stronger grammatical case can be made for a following subjunctive “it be,” but the indicative mood was employed, telling us that indicative “it is” was possible in the Lancelot Andrewes example, where the independence of the clause was more likely:

1648, John March (compiler), Court of King’s Bench:

England and Wales, *Reports*

But **if there be** a *Venire facias*, and **it is** erroneous,
it is not holpen by any Statute.

Italics in the original; bolding added.

Singular *be* usage in indicative contexts is uncommon in the earlier textual record, but it can be found, even when there is no closely preceding subjunctive that might have led to the use of *be*:

Numbers 5:30

Or when the spirit of jealousy cometh upon him,
and **he be** jealous over his wife, and shall set the woman before the Lord,

King James “he be” is often rendered “he is” in modern versions.

1618, John Wood, *The true honor of navigation and*

navigators

Though the Iewes would haue stoned him, Herod would haue killed him,
and here **he be** in a great tempest, to all shewes in extremitie of danger:
yet no maruell if hee sleepe securely,
knowing that no harme could come to him.

More common in the textual record is **plural** *be* in indicative contexts. Here are some examples that contain either contextually influenced subjunctive “they be” or indicative “they be” (depending on how one wants to look at it), matching Book of Mormon usage:

1532, Gentian Hervet (translator), Xenophon’s *Treatise of*

household

No by my faith, and **if there be** any, **they be** very fewe.

1577, Barnabe Googe (translator), Conrad Heresbach's

Four books of husbandry

which is a signe, that there is eyther but one king,
or **yf there be** moe, **they be** agreed:

1578, John Florio, *Familiar speech, merry proverbs, witty
sentences, and golden sayings*

if there be any, **they be** brought,

[Page 195]Mormon 8:17

and **if there be** faults / **they be** the faults of a man

Seventh, *saith* is frequently employed in the earliest text for the historical present, as it is in the King James Bible.¹⁹ Barlow includes this item under the umbrella of strained language, perhaps because of a high usage rate, which in any event is not automatically chargeable to Joseph Smith.

Conclusion

The foregoing critique clarifies that understanding the English language of the Book of Mormon requires much more knowledgeable consideration than has been proffered by most LDS scholars through the years. Some well-known figures in the field might currently misunderstand Book of Mormon translation issues because of under informed, inaccurate views of its vocabulary and grammar. Reliable pronouncements on Book of Mormon language must proceed from careful scholarship that involves the consulting of large databases of modern English (both early and late) as well as the 1611 King James Bible (and even other early Bibles). Analysts will take an important step forward once they free themselves of a desire to stipulate, against descriptive linguistic evidence, that the earliest text of the Book of Mormon is full of bad grammar and that Joseph Smith corrected much of it for the 1837 edition. Rather, the text and the textual record demand that we seek to know and understand the archaic English — both biblical and extra-biblical — that makes up the fiber of the book's language.

1. 1671, Henry Carey (translator; died 1661), Jean-François Senault's *The Use of Passions* [*De l'usage des passions* (1641)], page 267 [*Early English Books Online* A59163]. Spelling and punctuation have been slightly modified.
2. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27–28.
3. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 27. In the first edition Barlow also gave the current reading of the title-page phrase in this paragraph: "if there are faults they are the mistakes of men." In both editions he writes that the phrase in

question was found in the 1830 preface, even though the two-page preface is different from the title page. This is another minor inaccuracy. The 1830 preface begins on page iii (unnumbered) and contains Doctrine and Covenants revelatory language.

4. Oxford English Dictionary, **strained**, *adj.*, definition 5:

1747 Ld. Chanc. Hardwicke in G. Harris *Life* (1847) I. 374

I own I thought this a strained construction, and did not scruple to say so.

5. Oxford University Press (website), accessed 15 May 2017, global.oup.com.

6. See Joseph Smith Papers, “Documents, 1828–1829,” accessed 15 May 2017, www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/documents/pre1830.

7. Royal Skousen published information on obsolete “but if” under Mosiah 3:19 — one of the verses referred to by Barlow in the above quotation — in Part Two of *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU, 2005). *Analysis of Textual Variants* (2004–2009) contains many other discussions of archaic vocabulary. See also “The Archaic Vocabulary of the Book of Mormon,” *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 25.5 (2005): 2–6; and “Editor’s Preface,” *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xxxvii–xxxix.

8. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1951), 42.

9. The WordCruncher database used for this study was prepared from nearly 25,000 publicly available *Early English Books Online* texts (EEBO Phase 1).

10. See Royal Skousen, *Grammatical Variation* (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2016), 1268.

11. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, Mosiah 3:19; and Royal Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 457.

12. Besides invariant *is*, there isn’t much {-s} inflection in the 1611 version; for example, there is one case of *takes* (Ecclesiasticus 22:2) but none of *has* or *makes*.

13. Consider the following statements found at “Language Variation and Change,” Linguistic Society of America, accessed 29 May 2017, www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/language-variation-and-change: “First, all living languages are always changing”; “Language change inevitably leads to variation, and variation within a speech community often leads to social valuation of particular features as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’?”

14. Periphrastic *did* in the Book of Mormon matches sixteenth-century usage patterns on multiple levels. See Stanford Carmack, “The Implications of Past-Tense Syntax in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 120, 123, 158–159, 169–172 (<https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-implications-of-past-tense-syntax-in-the-book-of-mormon/>).

[15](#). The details are more complex than this, but this statement is generally accurate.

[16](#). See Royal Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 36.

[17](#). *Ibid.*, 467, 890, 1200.

[18](#). Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 1 Nephi 15:13. The insertion of *shall* by Joseph Smith, to make it like the surrounding language, was an optional edit, since the original Book of Mormon variation is well-formed and found in the textual record. Changing *hath* to *shall have* would have been a more conservative, better edit.

Brant Gardner, on page 184 of *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), makes assertions about tense usage in this passage that do not stand up to scrutiny. A critique of Gardner's view may be carried out at a later time.

[19](#). See Royal Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 410, which gives Luke 24:36 as an example, where *saith* is used for present-tense *légei*. A sampling shows *saith* to be the most common translation of this Greek word, with *said* the second most common, followed by minor variants such as *saying*, *spake*, and *calleth*.