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When Hypotheses Collide: Responding to Lyon and Minson's “When Pages Collide”

Brant A. Gardner

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WHEN HYPOTHESES COLLIDE: RESPONDING TO LYON AND MINSON'S "WHEN PAGES COLLIDE"

Brant A. Gardner

Abstract: At the end of 2012, Jack M. Lyon and Kent R. Minson published "When Pages Collide: Dissecting the Words of Mormon." They suggest that there is textual evidence that supports the idea that Words of Mormon 12-18 is the translation of the end of the previous chapter of Mosiah. The rest of the chapter was lost with the 116 pages, but this text remained because it was physically on the next page, which Joseph had kept with him.

In this paper, the textual information is examined to determine if it supports that hypothesis. The conclusion is that while the hypothesis is possible, the evidence is not conclusive. The question remains open and may ultimately depend upon one's understanding of the translation process much more than the evidence from the manuscripts.

Jack M. Lyon and Kent R. Minson published "When Pages Collide: Dissecting the Words of Mormon" at the end of 2012. They conclude:

Without the benefit of Royal Skousen's landmark publications on the original Book of Mormon text, scholars have previously described Words of Mormon verses 12–18 as a "bridge" or "transition" that Mormon wrote to connect the record of the small plates with his abridgment from the large plates. Based on the now-available documentary evidence, that analysis can be seen as faulty—an attempt to explain what should never have needed explaining. There is no "bridge"

between the small plates and the rest of the Book of Mormon. There is only the Words of Mormon itself (consisting of verses 1–11), where Mormon simply explains why he is including the small plates with the rest of the record. The verses that follow (12–18) belong in the book of Mosiah.¹

That is an important suggestion. If correct, it fully supports their conclusion that “this paper provides a new explanation of what may have occurred—one that makes sense based on the documentary and textual evidence. This may seem like a small matter, but it could have important ramifications for study and scholarship.”² Most important is their assertion that “based on the now-available documentary evidence, that analysis [that words of Mormon verses 12–18 are a bridge between the text from the small to the text from Mormon’s plates] can be seen as faulty.” Having suggested that their conclusion is based on Skousen’s meticulous work on the Book of Mormon manuscripts, it is critical to understand how, and if, Skousen’s information leads to that conclusion.

Lyon and Minson argue that verses 12–18 physically existed as part of the Original Manuscript and immediately preceded what we have as Mosiah chapter 1. These verses would have been the last text of the previous chapter that happened to have been written on the hypothetical page 117 of the translation prepared by Joseph Smith and Martin Harris (the completed 116 having been lost). Thus, rather than a bridging synopsis, the text would represent text that was originally intended to be the conclusion to the lost chapter preceding our current Mosiah chapter 1.

1. Jack M. Lyon and Kent R. Minson, “When Pages Collide: Dissecting the Words of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 51/4 (2012): 134.

2. Lyon and Minson, “When Pages Collide,” 134–35.

On the other hand, I have suggested that verses 12–18 form an inspired recapitulation of the missing material, but are not representative of any text from the original plate text or dictation.³ Before examining the evidence, we should note that our separate interpretations probably arise from our differing ideas about the nature of the Book of Mormon translation. Lyon and Minson more closely follow Skousen's often-articulated position that "Joseph Smith received an English-language text word for word, which he read off to his scribe."⁴ I suspect that their preference for Skousen's translation theory informs their disagreement with my suggestion: "Gardner is correct in his assessment that the 'material so precisely fits' with the remaining text of Mosiah, but, in our view, he is incorrect in his conclusion of what that means. The documentary and textual evidence supports the simpler explanation outlined in this paper."⁵ If they are correct that "the documentary and textual evidence supports the simpler explanation," then my hypothesis was incorrect. The critical part of the argument is the suggestion that there is textual evidence in Skousen's work that inevitably leads to their simpler explanation.

Lyon and Minson use D&C 10:41 to demonstrate that Joseph did not turn over everything that had been translated to Martin Harris: "Therefore, you shall translate the engravings which are on the plates of Nephi, down even till you come to the reign of king Benjamin, or until you come to that which you have translated, which you have retained." The dictated manu-

3. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 245–46.

4. Royal Skousen, "Some Textual Changes for a Scholarly Study of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 51/4 (2012): 99. See also Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 64, and Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 24.

5. Lyon and Minson, "When Pages Collide," 136, n. 19.

script was written on prepared gatherings, typically consisting of 12 pages folded over to create a set of 24 pages. Lyon and Minson suggest that Martin was given complete gatherings, and any text that had already been dictated and written on the next incomplete gathering represents that which was retained. This makes sense because the evidence shows that the gatherings were created prior to the scribe writing upon them.⁶ Thus they suggest that “what he had retained was the end of Mosiah chapter 2 (which is now Words of Mormon verses 12–18) and perhaps more.”⁷

That Martin received only the gatherings that were completed, and that if there were any text already begun on the next gathering it would have been retained, is eminently reasonable. Unfortunately, it cannot be asserted from that possibility that there actually was text retained on the 117th page (the next page of the next gathering). If we assume a completely regular 24-page gathering, Skousen suggests that the lost 116 pages extended through part of five gatherings.⁸ Dividing 116 pages by 24 gives us 4.83 gatherings. That is close to a full set of five 24-page gatherings and makes it reasonable to hypothesize that Martin received complete gatherings.

However, since the math also suggests that the 116 pages would not completely fill five 24-page gatherings, it is also possible that there would have been blank space at the end of the fifth gathering. Because the evidence suggests that the gatherings were created prior to use, any blank space diminishes the probability that there was a text fragment retained on page 117. If there were blank space as suggested by the less-than-full us-

6. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 1:31. More information on the gatherings is found on pp. 34–36. Skousen notes that while the gathering was created before text was added, the text was added prior to the time the gatherings were stitched together (p. 34).

7. Lyon and Minson, “When Pages Collide,” 127.

8. Skousen, *Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 35.

age of the pages in the gathering, there wouldn't be any text on the next gathering as it should have been simply continued in the fifth gathering.

While the empty space would preclude Lyon and Minson's hypothesis, it is correct only if all of the gatherings were uniformly 24 pages. The lack of the Original Manuscript for this section makes it difficult to come to a firm conclusion. However, the extant gatherings of the Printer's Manuscript did not always contain precisely 24 pages. Lyon and Minson's hypothesis is still possible, but not inevitable.

If Martin had received completely full gatherings, and there was some text already translated and recorded on the sixth gathering, then only serendipitous coincidence would have placed the next chapter at the beginning of the next page. Oliver Cowdery conserved paper by continuing subsequent chapters on the same page and typically right after the end of the previous chapter. This continues to leave room for Lyon and Minson's suggestion that verses 12–18 were at the top of page 117 of the original and preceded the recording of "Chapter" on that same page.⁹ So far, the textual evidence at least leaves the door open for their solution, but does not conclusively support it.

At this point, we turn to a different type of textual evidence. In this case, we are examining the text on the manuscript, although it must be emphasized that the Original Manuscript is not extant for this crucial juncture. Accepting that when Joseph began translating again, he picked up in the book of Mosiah rather than starting with 1 Nephi, then the earliest extant translated text does not appear until Alma 10:31.¹⁰

9. Lyon and Minson, "When Pages Collide," 131, argue, after presenting the verses in question and the indication of the "Chapter" for what we have as Mosiah 1, that "Somewhere in that text is the end of the Words of Mormon and the beginning of page 117."

10. Skousen, *Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 35.

Therefore, the evidence comes from the Printer's Manuscript, which was the copy Oliver made to deliver to the compositor.

Lyon and Minson cite Skousen's analysis of an anomaly at the beginning of what we have as Mosiah Chapter 1. It is sufficiently important to repeat:

Originally, Oliver Cowdery simply wrote *Chapter III* (on line 3). This chapter specification reflects the probable reading of the Original Manuscript, which is no longer extant for any of the book of Mosiah. *Chapter III* implies that the beginning of the current book of Mosiah was indeed the beginning of chapter 3 of Mosiah in the original Book of Mormon text. The 116 lost pages containing the book of Lehi probably included part of the original first two chapters of the book of Mosiah."¹¹

Clearly, something was wrong with the *Chapter III* and it was later corrected to Chapter I. The question is what caused the numbering anomaly. Skousen suggests that there were two missing chapters of Mosiah, a proposition Lyon and Minson accept. It is a proposition that I had also accepted until this exercise forced me to directly consider this issue. It is absolutely important to emphasize that all of this information comes from the Printer's Manuscript and not from the Original. Were this information in the Original Manuscript the conclusions could be different.

First, Skousen's research demonstrates that the chapter numbers are later additions to the Printer's Manuscript. That is, the word *Chapter* was indicated, but not the number. At some later point, the numbers were added:

11. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, (Provo, UT: FARMS), 2.1.41 (no printed number, text accompanying plate 3).

“Chapter” is assigned to small books that contain only one section (such as Enos, Jarom, and Omni). And the chapter numbers are added later, in heavier ink and more carefully written (sometimes with serifs). In one place in the printer’s manuscript the added number is in blue ink rather than the normal black (now turned brown).

And sometimes the inserted chapter numbers are incorrect. For instance, at the beginning of 2 Nephi (see the above transcription), the initial “Chapter” is assigned the number VIII as if it were the next chapter in 1 Nephi (which in the original text contained seven chapters). Moreover, in numbering the chapters in Mosiah in the printer’s manuscript, Oliver accidentally skipped one number when he came to chapter 8 and incorrectly listed it as “Chapter IX.” This misnumbering then continues through to the end of Mosiah.¹²

This misnumbering directly impacts our understanding of the change from *Chapter III* to *Chapter I*. Lyon and Minson note an anomaly: “Oliver’s editing on other nearby pages also shows his confusion about what was going on in the manuscript at this point. For example, after he had written the phrase ‘The Words of Mormon,’ he inserted ‘Chapter 2.d’ (meaning ‘Chapter Second’) above it, indicating that he may initially have seen the Words of Mormon as a second chapter in the book of Omni. If so, that could also explain the ‘Chapter III’ at the beginning of the book of Mosiah.”¹³ While I will suggest that this is precisely so, Lyon and Minson reach a different conclusion with the following justification: “One must keep in mind, however, that ‘Chapter 2.d’ is a supralinear addition, while ‘Chapter

12. Royal Skousen, “Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 6/1 (1994): 138.

13. Lyon and Minson, “When Pages Collide,” 132.

III' is not, indicating that 'Chapter III' was part of the original manuscript. In addition, if Oliver had simply been continuing the number in the printer's manuscript, he likely would have written 'Chapter 3.d' rather than 'Chapter III.'¹⁴

The first problem with their conclusion is that it makes a statement about what must have been in the Original Manuscript solely on the basis of the type of numbering, Arabic or Roman. Unfortunately, the data do not support that conclusion. Oliver's previous numbering in the Printer's Manuscript indicates that he was very comfortable alternating between the use of Roman numerals and 2d, 3d, 4th-style notations. The first chapter in both 1 and 2 Nephi is "Chapter first," but the third chapter in 1 Nephi and the second of 2 Nephi begin with Roman numerals.¹⁵ The single chapter books (Enos, Jarom, and Omni) are all introduced as "The Book of . . . Chapter first."¹⁶ Thus we cannot hang much weight on the thread of the change in numbering style. Oliver was not sufficiently consistent that "Chapter III" must represent anything that was in the Original Manuscript. In fact, if he had been copying from the Original, the format could easily have been Arabic numerals as that is what we find for 1 Nephi chapters 2 and 3.¹⁷

Oliver's after-the-fact numbering of Chapter III was likely occasioned by his previous numbering in Omni. The begin-

14. Lyon and Minson, "When Pages Collide," 132–33.

15. Skousen, *Printer's Manuscript*, 69, line 36 has Chapter 2nd for the second chapter of 1 Nephi. The third chapter begins on page 78, line 13, and has "Chapter III." The first chapter of 2 Nephi is "Chapter 12st" on page 143, line 25. The second chapter, page 154, line 11, is "Chapter II." Thus the mixing of the two styles is common and not indicative that Chapter III must have been copied from the *Original Manuscript*.

16. Skousen, *Printer's Manuscript*, Enos, 270, line 10; Jarom, 274, line 4; and Omni 276, line 11.

17. Skousen, *Original Manuscript*, 81, 95. It is interesting that chapter confusion again occurs between 1 and 2 Nephi, with overwritten chapter numbers and then supralinear "second" to mark the "second" book of Nephi, followed by the supralinear "chapter I."

ning of the book of Omni has “The Book of Omni Chapter first.”¹⁸ Although Oliver was familiar with that use for single chapter books, he was faced with a second textual issue as he looked at what was written for the end of Omni and the beginning of Words of Mormon. At that point, Skousen indicates a line, an unusual marking, but certainly making an apparent difference between the end of Omni 1 and what followed. What followed, however, didn’t replicate the model of the beginning of a new book. It simply begins “The words of Mormon And now I Mormon”¹⁹ There was clearly a division, but not the kind of marker that Oliver had seen for a new book (which announces “The book of . . .”). Therefore his initial solution was to call it a chapter (even seen in the Original Manuscript when 1 Nephi ended and 2 Nephi begins—it was originally marked as a Chapter rather than a new book). It is unclear when Words of Mormon became its own book as that is not indicated in the manuscript. According to the manuscript, it might have been presented to the compositor as the second chapter of Omni.²⁰

The best we can say from the textual evidence is that the seam between the small plates translation, Words of Mormon, and the beginning of Mosiah was no more clear for Oliver than it is for us. When he attempted to make sense of it, Oliver initially saw Words of Mormon as a chapter in Omni, and he appears to have numbered *Chapter III* in Mosiah following that line of reasoning. Remembering that this evidence is from the Printer’s Manuscript, Oliver’s choice makes sense if he was numbering the chapters in the Printer’s Manuscript rather than copying the chapter numbers from the Original. Skousen’s evidence is

18. Skousen, *Printer’s Manuscript*, 1:276.

19. Skousen, *Printer’s Manuscript*, 281, lines 22–23. Punctuation and capitalization as in the typescript, but supralinear additions are left out.

20. This may have some interesting ramifications for the way the plate text constructed books and chapters. The evidence here was that there was a marked break to separate Words of Mormon, but that Mormon did not consider it a “book” and therefore marked it differently.

that the numbers were added to the Printer's Manuscript after the copy had been made, and the evidence suggests that Oliver did. When Oliver inserted the chapter numbers after making the copy, he didn't see the typical indication of a new book and therefore numbered Mosiah as though it were a continuation of Omni. The title "Book of Mosiah" is written supralinearly and therefore indicates a later addition. Having cast Words of Mormon as chapter two of Omni, he wouldn't have realized his mistake immediately, though he certainly did after reading through the text in Mosiah.²¹

This explanation of the textual timeline is at least as viable as that presented by Lyon and Minson. With the evidence that Oliver numbered the chapters in the Printer's Manuscript only after the copy was completed and the later supralinear addition of the label "Book of Mosiah," I suggest that it is actually more likely. The textual evidence of the chapter numbering does not provide evidence to support Lyon and Minson's conclusions. Thus, what would be their strongest textual support for their hypothesis does not, in fact, support their conclusion.

The final question Lyon and Minson address is the probability that some text existed on page 117 prior to the beginning of the full chapter in Mosiah. They quote an email exchange with Royal Skousen in which Skousen indicates, "As far as how pages of O [original manuscript] can end, it appears that the scribe would write to the end of the page and then continue on the next page, no matter where he was. I went through pages 3–14 of O, as a sample and found 9 cases where the page begins with a sentence fragment but 3 cases where the page be-

21. My reconstruction of the process, from this evidence, is that Oliver wrote the text indicating books and chapters. However, they were all in continuous text. In order to number them, Oliver had to review and read the text. Therefore, he would have numbered Chapter III based on what he had done previously, but then discovered that he was reading Mosiah and therefore returned to make the change, at which time he would also have inserted the supralinear "The book of Mosiah."

gins with a sentence.”²² This strongly suggests that there would have been text on the retained page 117 that preceded the word “Chapter.” It is also possible that by sheer serendipity there was a clean division between what Martin took and the beginning of page 117, but it would seem that having some remaining text is much more likely, supporting Lyon and Minson’s hypothesis.

It is entirely plausible that there was text retained prior to where we have the beginning of Mosiah Chapter 1. However, their conclusion was that there was textual evidence for this, and there is not. It is plausible without specific support. Without any actual textual evidence to determine whether or not verses 12–18 of Words of Mormon represent that proposed text, we are left with only the content of the verses themselves. Who wrote them? I don’t believe that Skousen’s textual evidence tells us. We have to make some educated deductions from what is available. I list verses 11–18 of Words of Mormon to include the text Lyon and Minson consider to be the retained transition (12–18).

11 And they were handed down from king Benjamin, from generation to generation until they have fallen into my hands. And I, Mormon, pray to God that they may be preserved from this time henceforth. And I know that they will be preserved; for there are great things written upon them, out of which my people and their brethren shall be judged at the great and last day, according to the word of God which is written.

12 And now, concerning this king Benjamin—he had somewhat of contentions among his own people.

13 And it came to pass also that the armies of the Lamanites came down out of the land of Nephi, to battle against his people. But behold, king Benjamin gathered together his armies, and he did stand against

22. Lyon and Minson, “When Pages Collide,” 131.

them; and he did fight with the strength of his own arm, with the sword of Laban.

14 And in the strength of the Lord they did contend against their enemies, until they had slain many thousands of the Lamanites. And it came to pass that they did contend against the Lamanites until they had driven them out of all the lands of their inheritance.

15 And it came to pass that after there had been false Christs, and their mouths had been shut, and they punished according to their crimes;

16 And after there had been false prophets, and false preachers and teachers among the people, and all these having been punished according to their crimes; and after there having been much contention and many dissensions away unto the Lamanites, behold, it came to pass that king Benjamin, with the assistance of the holy prophets who were among his people—

17 For behold, king Benjamin was a holy man, and he did reign over his people in righteousness; and there were many holy men in the land, and they did speak the word of God with power and with authority; and they did use much sharpness because of the stiffneckedness of the people—

18 Wherefore, with the help of these, king Benjamin, by laboring with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul, and also the prophets, did once more establish peace in the land. (Words of Mormon 1:11–18)

Although Lyon and Minson are willing to suggest the entire block of verses from 12–18 appeared at the top of page 117,²³ they note Skousen's opinion: "It strikes me that it is verse 12 that does not belong to the original Mosiah chapter II, but

23. Lyon and Minson, "When Pages Collide," 131.

from verse 13 to the end of Words of Mormon could be the end of Mosiah chapter II (original chapters).”²⁴ Skousen is open to at least this verse not being part of the translation from the plates: “Maybe verse 12 is the basic link between the Words of Mormon and the book of Mosiah. It could have even been added by Joseph Smith to connect things up.”²⁵ While Skousen and I disagree on the nature of the translation, in at least one verse we agree that we may have text in our current Book of Mormon that was not translated from the plates. What, however, of the rest of the verses?

Admitting that it is certainly *possible* that they represent the text at the top of page 117, I nevertheless cannot see it as the *probable* source. First, the serendipity of retaining only a few verses that happen to synopsise major content as being the very text that happened to be copied onto page 117 is almost as unlikely as beginning that page precisely at a chapter beginning. Even if we would not have a sentence fragment, we would have had a conceptual fragment. The sentence or sentences should have been chapter conclusions, not a summary. This is easily checked by examining the chapters that Mormon wrote. Mormon does not end chapters with a synopsis of what he has just written. It places too heavy a burden on the hypothesis to take something otherwise unattested in Mormon’s writings and posit them as authentic to his original.²⁶

24. Lyon and Minson, “When Pages Collide,” 131; quoting from an email exchange.

25. Lyon and Minson, “When Pages Collide,” 131.

26. Lyon and Minson, “When Pages Collide,” 131. Skousen notes some anomalies in the construction of these verses. He notes that “‘somewhat contentions’[is] a very odd expression for the Book of Mormon. I don’t think we have the word ‘somewhat’ occurring right before a noun anywhere else in the text.” I don’t know that this allows us to come to any conclusions, but it does suggest that there is something anomalous in the text, an anomaly I would extend to the ultimate source of the text, which I have suggested is prophetic rather than a translation from the plate text.

The final bit of “evidence” upon which my skepticism relies is admittedly highly subjective. In my view, this simply isn’t the way Mormon would have written this information. Mormon’s descriptions of events do not have this level of terseness until 4 Nephi, which I argue has a different structural intent than other writings, and one that does not apply to these verses.²⁷ These verses describe nothing short of the crucial events that led up to Benjamin’s speech. They deal with an external war with the Lamanites, an internal civil war, and a religious crisis. Compare the treatment in this synopsis with similar topics in the book of Alma. These are things that Mormon cares about deeply. They are an important part of the story of the struggle of faith that he is building. I suggest that it is so completely incongruous for Mormon to have written this synopsis that we must look to another source. This is a synopsis of material that should have been in the missing text from the beginning of Mosiah.²⁸ It is not the way Mormon wrote about those topics. It is not the way Mormon closed chapters. If we are looking at textual evidence, the evidence of how Mormon constructed his chapters argues against his authorship of these verses.

These verses are worth examining to determine their relationship to the text on the gold plates. Lyon and Minson read these verses as text from the Original Manuscript and therefore part of the translation and thus Mormon’s words. Reviewing the evidence they present, I do not find that the textual evidence is any help in solving the question. Looking at the verses themselves, I cannot see Mormon’s hand in them. That is, of course, a subjective judgment. Consequently, there is unlikely to be any

27. Brant Gardner, “Mormon’s Editorial Method and Meta-Message,” *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 99–104.

28. The missing text may or may not have been two chapters. The reason for assuming that there were two chapters is related to the change in numbers, but that may be related to the Printer’s Manuscript chapter numbers rather than the original. It is clear that text is missing, but I can no longer confidently say that it is two chapters.

firm conclusion on this matter. If one's preferred understanding of the translation of the Book of Mormon suggests that our English Book of Mormon is, using Skousen's terminology, a tight translation of the original, then one would support a reconstruction that allows these verses to be seen as part of that tight translation. If, on the other hand, one believes that the translation was less rigidly connected to the plate text, then there is room for these verses to be the inspired recapitulation of information that had been irretrievably lost. Lyon and Minson's suggest that "based on the now-available documentary evidence, that analysis [that words of Mormon verses 12–18 are a bridge between the text from the small to the text from Mormon's plates] can be seen as faulty." The evidence is not as conclusive as their statement suggests. The question is still open.²⁹

Brant A. Gardner (MA State University of New York Albany) is the author of Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon and The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon, both published through Greg Kofford Books. He has contributed articles to Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl and Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community. He has presented papers at the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research conference as well as at Sunstone.

29. Lyon and Minson, "When Pages Collide," 134.

