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## **Celebrating Exactitude, When It's Appropriate**

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# CELEBRATING EXACTITUDE, WHEN IT'S APPROPRIATE

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Daniel C. Peterson

***Abstract:** It's almost always better to be right than to be wrong, to be exact than to be sloppy. In scholarship generally and serious scriptural study specifically, it's important to work toward precision in both interpretation and explanation. However, the Lord is fully capable of reaching us where we are, despite our imperfect languages and our limited capacities. "These commandments are of me," he says at D&C 1:24, "and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding."*

Some of you are no doubt familiar with the venerable joke about the monk who, after decades of anticipation, finally has an opportunity to examine the document that has governed much of his long life. When at last he emerges from the archive in which he's been permitted to study the original manuscript, tears of regret and sorrow are coursing down his face. When his waiting friends ask him why he's so sad, he responds: "The word was *celebrate!*"<sup>1</sup>

In such cases, it's important to be precise, and to get the words right.

Many years ago, a friend who was a fellow classics major told me of a Sunday School class that he had just attended. It was apparently focused on the apocalyptic prophecies in Matthew 24.

To illustrate Matthew 24:12 (which, in the King James Version, reads, "And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold"), the dedicated teacher had come equipped with a wax candle and a box of matches. Several times, he lit the candle and, after a short interval,

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1. I heartily dislike explaining jokes; doing so almost invariably ruins them. However, just to be certain in this case: the monk is implicitly explaining that the operative term *wasn't* actually *celibate*.

blew it out each time, inviting members of the class to contemplate the significance of cooling wax.

But the verb *to wax* that is used in KJV Matthew 24:12 has absolutely nothing to do with the cooling of wax. It means, simply, “to grow,” and is an English cognate of the German verb *wachsen*, which carries exactly the same meaning. We say of the moon that it “waxes” and “wanes,” by which we mean that the size of the visible moon appears to cyclically increase (grow) and then decrease (shrink) in the sky. When some of us say that Senator Bunkum “waxed eloquent” or that a prose author suddenly “waxed poetic,” we’re not talking at all about beeswax or candle wax.

The verb and the noun are quite distinct in meaning and largely, if not wholly, distinct in their etymological histories. Our modern noun *wax* comes from Old English *weax* (which referred to a substance made by bees), which in turn comes from proto-Germanic *wahsam* and ultimately from the proto-Indo-European root *wokso-* (“wax”). By contrast, our modern verb *to wax* (in the sense of “to grow”) derives from Old English *weaxan*, “to increase, grow,” and, before that, from proto-Germanic *wahsan* and proto-Indo-European *weg-*.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if staring at cooling candle wax delivered any actual insights into Matthew 24:12, such insights would occur only by sheer coincidence.

But the teacher wasn’t done yet. He or she then turned to Matthew 24:28, which, in the King James Version, reads, “For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together.”

What was the significance of eagles gathering around a carcass? As I recall, the class didn’t immediately see it, so the teacher gave class members a helpful hint: What country has an eagle as its symbol? That’s easy! The United States of America is symbolized by an eagle! So Matthew 24:28 points to the central role of the United States in the events of the latter days!

Unfortunately for that interpretation, though, numerous other countries have used eagles on their flags or otherwise as their symbols, including imperial Rome, modern Mexico, Austria, Achaemenid Persia, fascist Italy, and the Third Reich. Moreover, an eagle was the personal messenger of Zeus, the king of the Greek gods.

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2. Also deriving from *weg-* is the Greek verb *auxo* (1st person singular) or *auxein* (infinitive form), which means “to grow, to increase.” Αὐξώ (*Auxo* or “Increaser”) was the Greek goddess of growth, the protector of fertility, and the personification of the growing season of Spring/Summer. Compare such English words as *augment* and *augmentation*. (Sorry; I enjoy such things.)

Worse still, the King James translation of ἀετοί (*aetoi*) as “eagles” is almost certainly wrong. (The base meaning of the word *aetos* is probably more like “large soaring bird of prey” than a zoologically precise “eagle.”) Remember that the “eagles” of Matthew 24:28 are gathered around a carcass. The most fitting translation would probably therefore be “vultures,” since they are far better known as carrion birds than are eagles.<sup>3</sup>

(I can think of quite a number of countries, both historically and today, that *ought* to be symbolized by vultures, but there are none that, mentioned here, would be germane to the point I wish to explore.)

Thus, at a very minimum, my friend’s Sunday School teacher was, once again, putting far more weight on a dubious translation of a word than the original word could bear.

I thought of these stories while I was reading Royal Skousen’s recently posted “Update of the Pre-Print of a Discussion of the Book of Mormon Witnesses.”<sup>4</sup> That particular article isn’t actually about getting the words precisely right, but reading it got me to thinking about Skousen’s Critical Text Project overall, a principal focus of which is to retrieve, to the extent that it’s humanly possible, the original text that Joseph Smith dictated, obviously including the exact original words.

This is important, of course. It makes a real difference whether 1 Nephi 12:18 is talking about “the sword of the justice of the Eternal God” or “the word of the justice of the Eternal God,” and whether 1 Nephi 13:32 envisions humanity in a state of “woundedness,” “blindedness,” or “wickedness.”<sup>5</sup> Are we to expect “the Sun of righteousness” or “the Son of righteousness” (2 Nephi 26:9; 3 Nephi 25:2; Ether 9:22)? Should we

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3. See John Topel, “What Kind of a Sign are Vultures? Luke 17, 37b,” *Biblica* 84 (2003) 403–11. In fact, probably most modern English translations have opted for *vultures* over *eagles*. See BibleHub, s.v. “Matthew 24:28,” <https://biblehub.com/matthew/24-28.htm>. Likewise, the Schlachter 2000 German translation, the Einheitsübersetzung, and the Neue Genfer Übersetzung have *Geier*. The Habrit Hakhadasha/Haderekh has מִירִשְׁנָה. And the Reina Valera Contemporánea has *buitres*.

4. See Royal Skousen, “Update of the Pre-Print of a Discussion of the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *Interpreter Foundation* (blog), August 25, 2021, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/blog-update-of-the-pre-print-of-a-discussion-of-the-book-of-mormon-witnesses-by-royal-skousen/>.

5. For some of my own thoughts on whether the text should be read as woundedness, blindedness, or wickedness, please see Daniel C. Peterson, “Two Essays on Sustaining and Enlarging the Doctrine,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): vii–xx, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/two-essays-on-sustaining-and-enlarging-the-doctrine/>.

remember the “travels” of the Jews, or their “travails” (2 Nephi 29:4)? Will we one day meet before “the pleasing bar of God,” or before his “pleading bar” (Jacob 6:13; Moroni 10:34)? Was Abinadi’s skin “scourged...with fagots” or was it “scorched” (Mosiah 17:13)? Should Mosiah 19:24 read “ceremony” or “sermon?” Was the intent at Alma 17:31 to “reserve the flocks unto the king,” or to “preserve” them, or to “restore” them? According to Alma 39:13, should we “retain” the wrongs that we’ve done or should we “repair” them? Is this life a “preparatory state” or a “probationary state” (Alma 42:10)? At Alma 43:45 and 44:5, were the Nephites defending their “rites of worship” or their “rights of worship?”

Scholars, especially, will want to know whether Mosiah 21:28 should read “Benjamin” or “Mosiah,” and whether the name at Mosiah 25:2 should be spelled as Mulek, Mulok, or Muloch. Before proposing ancient etymologies for it, researchers will need to know whether the Nephite chief judge’s name at Alma 50:40 was Pahoran or Parhoron.<sup>6</sup>

It’s for this reason that I would encourage all who intend to do serious scholarly study of the Book of Mormon — which is to say, among other things, all who want to write something on the subject for submission to the Interpreter Foundation — to (at a minimum) consult Royal Skousen’s *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* early and often in their research.

But I don’t want to overemphasize the importance of verbal precision. It is, or it can be, essential to scholarly analysis and it can obviously affect our interpretation or application of a given passage, but getting the words precisely right is plainly not essential to spreading the fundamental message of the Book of Mormon or gaining a spiritual witness of its truth. Any published version of the book is capable of “show[ing] unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers,” helping them to “know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever,” and “convincing ... the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God.”<sup>7</sup> Hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions, have gained testimonies of the Book of Mormon from flawed editions of the book. And Royal Skousen himself is among them. In an article published in 2002, he reflects that

There has ... been a spiritual dimension to this work, although my own testimony of the Book of Mormon is not based on my work on the critical text project, but rather on my own

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6. The examples in this paragraph and the preceding one are drawn from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 745–89.

7. See the Title Page of the Book of Mormon.

personal witness that this book records events which really happened. About twenty-five years ago, as I was reading the Book of Mormon during a time of personal difficulty, I reread the account of Ammon, King Lamoni, and the queen in Alma 19, which records the moment when the servant woman Abish raises the queen from the ground:

Alma 19:29–30

and it came to pass that she went and took the queen by  
the hand  
that perhaps she might raise her from the ground  
and as soon as she touched her hand  
she arose and stood upon her feet  
and cried with a loud voice saying  
O blessed Jesus who has saved me from an awful hell  
O blessed God have mercy on this people  
and when she had said this she clapped her hands  
being filled with joy  
speaking many words which were not understood

As I was reading this passage, the spirit personally witnessed to me, “This really happened.” I have always cherished this moment in my life, and have been grateful to the Lord for the sure knowledge that the Book of Mormon is the word of the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

Please note, though, that his personal witness came to him prior to his launch of the Critical Text Project, where exactitude is exemplified. The version of the text that he was reading read differently than the version he cites above, which is the result of his own text-critical work. In the standard edition currently used by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Alma 19:29–30 reads just a bit differently than the text for which Royal Skousen has made a scholarly argument:

And it came to pass that she went and took the queen by the  
hand, that perhaps she might raise her from the ground; and  
as soon as she touched her hand she arose and stood upon her  
feet, and cried with a loud voice, saying: O blessed Jesus, who

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8. See Royal Skousen, “History of the Critical Text Project of the Book of Mormon,” in *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, eds. M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 21, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol11/iss2/3/>.

has saved me from an awful hell! O blessed God, have mercy on this people!

And when she had said this, she clasped her hands, being filled with joy, speaking many words which were not understood.

Notice that, in Royal Skousen's Yale edition, the standard edition's *she clasped her hands* reads, instead, *she clapped her hands*. But the change made no difference in Skousen's ability to receive a spiritual confirmation of the truth of the Book of Mormon.

So, likewise, although we recognize the fallibility of our efforts at the Interpreter Foundation, we hope that they will not only provide interesting information and insights and answers to questions, but that they will be a means of strengthening and perhaps even of kindling testimonies, of solidifying the foundations of faith, of opening minds and hearts to the witness of the Spirit.

I'm grateful beyond expression to all those who make these efforts possible through donations of time, effort, and, yes, money. I'm grateful to the authors, copy editors, source checkers, and others who have created this volume, and I especially want to thank Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, the two managing or production editors for the *Journal*. As everybody else in Interpreter's leadership does, they volunteer their service without financial or other compensation. They are indispensable. But we can still use more help!

**Daniel C. Peterson** (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).