The Case of Plural *Was* in the Earliest Text

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Abstract: Because it is primarily an Early Modern English text (in terms of its English language), the earliest text of the Book of Mormon understandably employs plural was — for example, “the words which was delivered” (Alma 5:11). It does so in a way that is substantially similar to what is found in many writings of the Early Modern period — that is, it manifests the syntactic usage, variation, and differential rates typical of that era.

This study looks at a subset of the questionable grammar of the Book of Mormon. It focuses on the use of was in contexts where standard modern English requires the verb form were. This has been called plural was by linguists, as a convenient way to refer to the not-infrequent use of was with plural subjects that has been present in the language since Middle English and possibly earlier.¹ Of course we miss these readings in the current LDS text; we must turn to the following edition to see them today: Royal Skousen, ed., The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2009). Indeed, we could not learn about these matters without such a critical text.

Because of the resources that have become available recently, it is a new day in the study of the English-language text of the Book of Mormon. Most of the examples presented here — from both the Book of Mormon and the Early Modern English textual record — will be new to virtually everyone; they should be eye-opening. Here I unapologetically focus on the form of expression, not the content; cases of exceptional usage, not the majority usage. Still, some excerpts provide us with a glimpse of interesting content.

Interestingly, syntactic variation in the earliest text of the Book of Mormon at times matches what may be found in the textual record of earlier English. This suggests that implicit knowledge of Early Modern English and its tendencies was part of the translation of the Book of Mormon. When we consider the array of diverse matching, at times obscure, an Early Modern English view is compelling. That is the approach adopted here. Let us now consider why that is the correct approach.

Abstracting away from Hebrew-like expressions and non-English words found in the earliest text, we may reasonably assert, based on evidence, that there are four sources for the English of the Book of Mormon:

1. King James English
2. Standard modern English
3. Modern American dialect
4. Nonbiblical Early Modern English

Numbers 1 and 2 are uncontroversially accepted by everyone, number 3 has been largely accepted and assumed from the beginning, but many reject the possibility of number 4, often resorting to protesting that because it is not readily apparent why nonbiblical Early Modern English would have been used, it cannot be so. Nevertheless, there is abundant evidence for that position. Indeed, pertinent lexical, morphological, and syntactic evidence has been provided for some time by Skousen (1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2004–2009 [Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon], 2005, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015), and more recently also by Carmack (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b). Volume 3 of the Book of Mormon critical text project contains a large amount of evidence as well. Those who choose to reject the existence of nonbiblical Early Modern English in the earliest text must ignore or dismiss hundreds of pieces of evidence that are mutually supportive.

As for number 3, it turns out that provincialisms such as drownded, massacreed, and had ought to are found in earlier English as well (these three examples are taken from Grant Hardy’s introduction to Skousen’s The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text, page xx). Here is evidence in support of that assertion:

1656 EEBO A62145 Sir William Sanderson [1586?–1676] A compleat history of the lives and reigns of, Mary Queen of Scotland, and of her son and successor, James the Sixth

And finding that he was thus betrayed,
ran into the sea and drownded himself.
1672 EEBO A30510 Edward Burrough [1634–1662] *The memorable works of a son of thunder and consolation*

Surely when you are sober you will consider, and when you are come to your selves you will be ashamed, and will not open any more your malice and wrath which hath drowned your honesty and civility;

The principal data source used in this study is *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) [Chadwyck-Healey: ‹http://eebo.chadwyck.com›]. Many of these texts can be freely accessed by using the provided EEBO number and entering it after http:/ / name.umdl.umich.edu/. The publicly searchable portion of EEBO–TCP (Text Creation Partnership) is ‹http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup›. Mark Davies provided a very useful corpus and interface: *Early English Books Online, 400 million words, 1470s–1690s* (2013–). I have also derived some of the examples from a 500-million-word corpus of my own elaboration, made from several thousand publicly available EEBO–TCP texts.

1655 EEBO A60194 Richard Sibbes [1577–1635] *A learned commentary or exposition: upon the first chapter of the second Epistle of S. Paul to the Corinthians*

how doth he deliver his Children when we see them taken away by death, and oftimes are massacred?

1658 EEBO A64619 James Ussher [1581–1656] *The annals of the world*

some he surprized by treachery, the rest he massacred in one night at a revelling;

1535 EEBO A07430 William Marshall, tr. [fl. 1535] | Marsilius of Padua [d.1342?] *The defence of peace*

and yf it be not so / than tell thou me, In what thyng he meane, that every soule shulde be subiecte to the powers, etc. For yf euer soule hadde oughte to be subiecte to Timotheus, and Titus, In suche maner iudgemente he shulde in vayne haue sayde admonysshe them.

1601 EEBO A07982 W. Traheron, tr. [fl.1601] | Remigio Nannini [1521?–1581?] *Ciuil considerations vpon many and sundrie histories*

he suffered them to come into the playne, without making any such resistance, as he had ought to haue done, because hee had giuen his word, that he would not stoppe their passage.

The same can be said of attackt, bellowses, fraid, grievous, kinsfolks, tremendous, etc., as well as various phrasal items. All these are cases of the earliest text employing Early Modern English that persisted in dialectal use. Interestingly, this is therefore language that Smith could have been quite familiar with when he saw and read words during the dictation. And it also provides evidence against a common misconception that dialect forms are recent inventions (corruptions of the language) when they are often (less-common) historical forms that
were marginalized. In view of the evidence, we may rewrite the above list as follows:

1. Early Modern English found in the King James Bible
2. Early Modern English that persisted in standard modern English
3. Early Modern English that persisted in modern dialects
4. Nonbiblical Early Modern English that underwent obsolescence

In addition to this, there is a very small amount of 18th-century language (vocabulary and perhaps syntax) in the earliest text, as well as dialectal overlay from dictation and scribal errors (the latter often hard to pin down definitively).

To sum up, the position that the text is **not** Smith’s language (mainly Early Modern English) is comprehensive and fully explanatory. On the other hand, the position that the text is Smith’s language (quasi-biblical, standard English, and American dialect) is inadequate, failing to explain much textual usage (all of number 4). For the above reasons I adopt the Early Modern English view, as set forth above.

### The {-s} plural of Early Modern English

The data presented here are related to what Charles Barber and Roger Lass have called the {-es} or {-s} plural of earlier English (they refer to the present-tense only).² Lass (1999:166) mentions that this particular morphosyntactic phenomenon was a minority alternant, “persist[ing] sporadically into the eighteenth century”. Barber (1997:169) wrote that in Middle English

the use of {-es} as a plural inflection is found in Scots, in Northern England, and in part of the North-East Midlands. Its occasional use in the standard southern language may be due to the influence of these northern forms. Alternatively, it may be due to the analogy of the third-person singular {-es} inflection. This is suggested by the fact that plural {-es} is seldom found in the early sixteenth century, and is commonest around 1600, when {-es} had displaced {-eth} as the singular ending.

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Lass (1999:166) takes *is* to be an “[−s] form”, noting heavy plural *is* usage in one late 15th- and early 16th-century northern dialect (the Yorkshire *Plumpton Correspondence* [letters]).

Ten years ago, in an article on plural *was* in Early Modern English, Nevalainen wrote that

the use of *was* with plural subjects was a northern English dialect feature in the 15th and 16th centuries, but it was by no means restricted to the north. In the course of the 17th century the pattern levelled dialectally, and declined, but continued to be used as a minority variant **even by the literate social ranks throughout the country.**

So plural *was* was a widespread literate usage. And although plural *is* usage may have reinforced plural *was* usage, there appears to have been a greater tendency in earlier English to use *was* with plural pronouns than *is*.

Here is a passage with close variation exemplifying that tendency (more examples could be given), along with a Book of Mormon match:

1664 EEBO A57970 Samuel Rutherford [1600?–1661] *Joshua redivivus*
the Lord saw ye *was* able by his grace to bear the loss of husband and childe, and that ye *are* that weak and tender

Alma 7:18–19
I had much desire that ye *was* not in the state of dilemma like your brethren, even so I have found that my desires have been gratified. For I perceive that ye *are* in the paths of righteousness

For many of the Book of Mormon examples discussed here, we can profitably consult Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 6 parts (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU, 2004–2009).

**Adam and Eve**

The following passage has frequently received notice as an example of Joseph Smith failing in an attempt to imitate older language:

1 Nephi 5:11
and also of Adam and Eve, which *was* our first parents

The change from “which was” to “who were” was made for the 1837 edition, marked in the printer’s manuscript by Joseph Smith.

4. See also the examples at Nevalainen, “Vernacular universals?”, 358; one of these is provided at Carmack (2014:223).
We can find this phrase criticized in various places today on the internet. In view of that, this is an important one to address at the outset. The relative pronoun here is non-restrictive, providing information that isn’t critical to the understanding of the main clause. It is employed with human antecedents, which makes it biblical in nature. The following old syntax, partly nonbiblical, is a close match:

**1566** EEBO A06932 Thomas Becon [1512–1567] *A new postil conteinyng most godly and learned sermons vpon all the Sunday Gospelles*

> not after the maner of ADAM and EUE, which was made of the grounde

The author was Thomas Becon (or Beccon), a British Protestant reformer. I have not found this language outside of the Early Modern period. So it turns out that in this case Smith actually succeeded admirably in matching older syntax. 5

The plagiarism argument made against the Book of Mormon is a charge frequently leveled against the text when convenient. In this case, the match is obscure, so a plagiarism charge is inconvenient (hardly anyone would believe it), and the argument is not made. That is the case in the majority of instances.

Because of the 1566 example, it is reasonable to view 1 Nephi 5:11 as an instance of Early Modern English, similar to what Thomas Becon wrote 450 years ago. Which being the case, this piece of syntax, pointed out quite often as a glaring blunder — a howler — in fact qualifies as additional evidence of its 16th-century character. That is how it is with the earliest text. When we read language that seems odd or suspect, it almost invariably points us to Early Modern English usage.

### Plural “which was” followed by “were”

The following passage has interesting agreement variation:

Mosiah 24:15

> [ the burden which was laid upon Alma and his brethren ]

> were made light;

The change from *was* to *were* was made for the 1837 edition, marked in the printer’s manuscript by Joseph Smith; see Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 2564 (Alma 46:33).

5. During the 16th century, the relative pronoun *which* was used quite often (non-restrictively) to refer to people, and “[plural noun phrase] which was” was relatively common. In the 17th century, the non-restrictive use of *which* with personal antecedents continued, although it diminished over time, eventually remaining as a vestigial use, as in “Our Father, which art in heaven”.
Singular *was* is used after a relative pronoun whose antecedent is plural (*burdens*); plural *were* is used after a complex subject (in brackets) whose head is plural (also *burdens*). So *burdens* acts as both an antecedent and a head, grammatically speaking.

Large corpora tell us that in earlier English *was* was employed at a relatively higher rate after the relative pronoun *which*, with a plural antecedent, than it was after plural noun phrases. Occasionally that manifested itself overtly, with close variation, as in Mosiah 24:15. Of course, the relative pronoun *which* is invariant in form — and so it doesn’t indicate by its shape whether the antecedent is plural or singular. Whether this contributed to a higher degree of plural *was* usage at that time is not our concern here. We simply note that it is not hard to find Early Modern English examples of “which was” preceded by plural noun phrases. Here are three examples:

1605 EEBO A69226 John Dove [1560/61–1618] *A confutation of atheisme*
neither how Moses his rodde devoured the SERPENTS which *was* made
by the sorcerers of Aegipt,

1655 EEBO A52713 James Naylor [1617?–1660] *The royall law and covenant of God*
and the Apostles which writ the EPISTLES which *was* to be read among
the Saints,

in such manner as he challenged
all the PRAISES which *was* given unto him,

The usage seen directly above — “which plural *was*” — though not uncommon, was not the dominant syntax of the period, becoming less common with the passage of time. Here is a Book of Mormon excerpt that is similar to these Early Modern English examples:

Alma 9 [heading]
The WORDS of Alma and also the WORDS of Amulek *which was*
declared unto the people which was in the land of Ammonihah.

This has received direct criticism, but it is simply an instance of Early Modern English plural *was*.\(^6\) Here we see a syntacto-lexical match — “words/accusations . . . which was declared”:

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he made **ACCUSATIONS** to be exhibited against **BRVTVS** and **CASSIVS**, and the rest of the conspirators, **which** **was** declared against them all:

In this next example “which was” is both preceded and followed by plural nouns:

Mosiah 25:11

when they thought upon the **LAMANITES**, **which** **was** their **BRETHREN**, of their sinful and polluted state,

The following may be an example of this syntax:

**1650** EEBO A40026 George Foster  *The pouring fourth of the seventh and last viall upon all flesh and fleshlines*

where formerly I did make out my glory and my name to your **FATHERS** of old, **which** **was** the **PEOPLE** whom I did chuse out of all nations;

More to the point, these next examples match the variation seen in Mosiah 24:15:

**1550** EEBO A13758 Thomas Nicolls, tr. | Thucydides  *The hystory . . . of the warre, whiche was betwene the Peloponesians and the Athenyans*

But pryncipally the **BRASIDES**, **whyche** **was** adioygninge unto them, **were** of that intelligence and confederacy, and had bene always ennemys of the Athenyans:

**1591** EEBO A19179 Antony Colynet  *The true history of the ciuill warres of France*

the raging **follies** **which** **was** committed at Tholouse **were** incredible to report, except his owne disciples had written them in his legend.

Examples like these, along with many other verified variational matches, indicate that Early Modern English competence was part of the translation. Syntactically, these expressions are extremely close:

\[
[ \text{<PLURAL NOUN PHRASE>} \text{ which was } \text{<PARTICIPLE> } ] \text{ subject } \text{were . . .}
\]

Here are two more clear examples that demonstrate the same syntactic matching:

**1560** EEBO A04920 John Knox [1505–1572]  *An answer to a great nomber of blasphemous cauillations written by an Anabaptist*

That place of Paule proveth not that all the **ISRAELITES**, **which** **was** called from Egypt, **were** within gods holie election to lief everlasting in Christ Jesus.
he praised God for that the Controversies which was amongst them, were not upon any fundamental Article.

This is reprinted older language, possibly from the 1630s.

This next example is also similar to the above, but the syntax is more complicated because squadron is formally singular and because of the prepositional phrase with a plural noun (in braces):

Moreover, [the Squadron {of the Kings Gallies}] which was kept in Genoa were generally commanded by Genoese Captains,

Despite outward appearances, the verb agreement, in both cases, probably derives from the head noun squadron. It is of course semantically plural, and it is probably grammatically plural as well. While “which was kept” doesn’t tell us this, “were generally commanded” suggests it, and unsurprisingly we find that squadron could be construed as plural during this time (as in certain varieties of present-day English):

The fourth Squadron were rank’d under the Standard of Dan, to whom belonged the Tribes of Naphthali and Asher.

This next example involves two conjoined nouns that overtly resolve to plural only in the larger agreement phrase:

The Divinity and Philosophy which was professed in these Universities were not taught with an intention to make the young Students more learned and understanding,

Plural number resolution is likely in the first instance as well, although it isn’t visible there (“which was professed”). These last two examples from 1663 and 1695 illustrate the complexity of language, and make understandable the emergence and persistence of variation.7

7. The following syntax is perhaps distinguishable because the antecedent of which is army, and that noun was usually grammatically singular in the latter half of the 18th century:

The prodigious army, of a million of Ethiopians, which was overthrown by Asa, were not all descendants of Chus,
In summary, the agreement pattern found in Mosiah 24:15 involves close variation that is an excellent match with no fewer than six examples of earlier usage. In that verse we see the tendencies of the past, with overt plural expression occurring only after the noun-phrase subject, not after the relative pronoun.

“Were” followed by conjoined “and was”

Next we take a look at the agreement variation found in this passage:

Mosiah 7:7
and they were surrounded by the king’s guard
and was taken and was bound and was committed to prison.

This is straightforward syntax, if unexpected and objectionable to the modern eye and ear. Normal “they were” is followed by three instances of elliptical syntax with conjoined was, even though the ellipted subject is clearly they. I have found three Early Modern English examples with the same syntactic pattern — that is, with were used right after the pronoun, and was used in conjoined predicates:

1581 EEBO A06863 John Merbecke [ca.1510–ca.1585] A booke . . . to those that desire the true vnderstanding & meaning of holy Scripture
Confirmation was that Ceremonie, which the Apostles did use, when they laide their handes upon those which received the holy Ghost after they were baptised of them, and was likewise ordeined by the auncient Fathers.

so we were put in prison again, and some hours after we were called forth again, and was had before the Governour John Indicot,

1659 EEBO A44796 Francis Howgill [1618–1669] The invisible things of God brought to light by the revelation of the eternal spirit
inwardly they were ravened from the spirit, and was gone from it into the earth, into the world, and served not the Lord Jesus Christ, but their own bellies,

Three different writers, from two different centuries, employed the same syntax found in Mosiah 7:7. In every case the syntax is passive in parallel: “they were past participle” followed by “and was past

If army is grammatically singular here, then were may agree with the following noun phrase, headed by descendants, or “a million of Ethiopians” may be the understood subject of were. Alternatively, semantically plural army may be construed as grammatically plural throughout, with overt expression only in the larger phrase, as in Early Modern English.
participle). The textual match is excellent because of the same pattern of variation, even though we don’t like the sound of the language today.

“Every soul which was . . . were”

Next we consider the following variable agreement pattern:

Alma 14:28

and every soul which was within the walls thereof, save it were Alma and Amulek, were slain;

In order to accurately analyze the language of this passage, it is helpful to note that “every ‹ singular noun ›” could be treated as either singular or plural during the Early Modern period. I have placed three examples of “every one was” (standard in modern English) in a note, providing here two examples of “every one were”:

1597 EEBO A22560 William Burton, tr. [1575–1645] | Achilles Tatius The most delectable and pleasaut history of Clitiphon and Leucippe

one of the passengers . . . got holde of the rope, and almost brought the boat to the ship side, and every one were made ready,

1616 EEBO A08882 Anthony Munday, tr. [1553–1633] Palmerin of England and Florian de Desart his brother

insomuch as every one thought his labour well imployed to do him service, and every one were desirous to question with him,

Notice how in the 1616 example the first instance of “every one” appears to be singular because of the following pronoun his, but then it is construed as plural in the second instance. The takeaway from this? At this point in time the language was quite fluid and unpredictable in this regard.

8. Examples of “every one was”:

1599 EEBO A04845 John King [1559?–1621] Lectures vpon Ionas deliuered at Yorke because the portions of the Levites and singers had not beeene given to them, and everie one was fled to his lande,

1602 EEBO A04680 Tho. Lodge, tr. [1558?–1625] | Flavius Josephus Works For all the porches were double, and everie one was supported by pillars,

1629 EEBO A11516 Nathanael Brent, tr. [1573?–1652] | Paolo Sarpi [1552–1623] The historie of the Councel of Trent For the Bores in Germany rebelled against the Princes, and Magistrates, and every one was busied with the warre of the Anabaptists.
As we might expect, there are more examples of “every one which was” than there are of its plural counterpart,\(^9\) nevertheless, here are two 16th-century examples of “every one which/that were”:

1579  EEBO A07026  George Gylpen, tr. [1514?–1602] | Philips van Marnix van St. Aldegonde [1538–1598]  *The bee hue of the Romishe Church*

he . . . coniured EVERIE ONE which were there present, that THEY shoulde beware from doing those,

1583  EEBO A13091  Phillip Stubbes  *The second part of the anatomie of abuses*  
to gather the benevolencies, and contributions of EVERIE ONE that were disposed to give,

This could be an example of indefinite, subjunctive were, rather than indicative were; in the subjunctive case the verb would convey a sense of ‘might be’.

Here is syntax that is the close to that of Alma 14:28, with variation in verb morphology:

1615  EEBO A23464  Edward Grimeston, tr. | Pierre d’Avity, sieur de Montmartin [1573–1635]  *The estates, empires, & principallities of the world*

They carried a hundred mils [i.e. mills] in carts,
[EVERY ONE of which] was turned with a horse, and were brought to grind their corne;

The subject is “every one of which”, the relative pronoun referring to mills; the verb phrases (truncated) are “was turned” and “were brought”. Even though which is not the grammatical subject of was, its immediacy may have influenced the choice of the singular by analogy with plural “which was” — syntax that wasn’t uncommon at the time. The alternative interpretation is that there is close variation in number construal, as we have seen above with “every one thought his labour” followed closely by

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9. The first example of “every one which was” shows consistent use of was:

1604  EEBO A16795  George Abbot [1562–1633]  *The reasons which Doctour Hill hath brought, for the vpholding of papistry*  
and for that EVERY ONE which was against them was ever accounted and reputed for an Heretike.

1654  EEBO A33335  Samuel Clarke [1599–1682]  *The marrow of ecclesiastical history*

But Regius did so clearly and fully open the genuine sense of them, that EVERY ONE which was not wilfully blinde might easily discern the truth:

1675  EEBO A43515  John Hacket [1592–1670]  *A century of sermons upon several remarkable subjects*  
EVERY SOUL which was a thirst drank.

1675  EEBO A45465  Henry Hammond [1605–1660]  *Sermons*  
That EVERY SOUL which was to spring from these loins, had been without those transcendent mercies.
“every one were desirous”. The same can be said of the Book of Mormon passage under consideration:

Alma 14:28

and [ every soul which was within the walls thereof ],

save it were Alma and Amulek, were slain;

“Every soul” is the head of the complex subject (in brackets) whose predicate is “were slain”; “every soul” is also the antecedent of which. It is impossible to know whether “every soul” is construed consistently as plural, or variably. Under the former view, the intervening relative pronoun which led to the use of singular was, while the head of the subject phrase, construed as plural, led to were.

Absence of plural number resolution

The conjunction save usually triggers the subjunctive in the text, as it does in Alma 14:28 (covertly). Otherwise, we would expect was in this clause, without resolution of the postverbal conjuncts Alma and Amulek, akin to what is possible in modern English and the following Book of Mormon examples:

Modern English

The pig was in the corral, and so was [ the horse and the donkey ].

Mosiah 24:16

And . . . so great was [ their faith and their patience ]

3 Nephi 6:6

And now it was Gidgiddoni and the judge Lachoneus and those which had been appointed leaders

This is a reasonable position to take because there is lack of resolution in the text even with preverbal conjuncts, as in this obvious example:

Alma 22:32

the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla

was nearly surrounded by water

The closest example of this syntax that I have seen is the following, taken from Tyndale’s translation of the Pentateuch (cf. Numbers 32:1):

1530 EEBO A13203 William Tyndale, tr. [d.1536] [The Pentateuch]

when they sawe the londe of Jaeser and the londe of Gilead

that it was an apte place for catell

So for Tyndale, “the land of X and the land of Y” didn’t automatically resolve to plural, and neither does it in the Book of Mormon. Here are
two more examples showing a lack of number resolution with singular conjuncts:10

1607 EEBO A13820 Edward Topsell [1572–1625?] *The historie of foure-footed beastes*

The fat of Wolues and the marrow of Swyne is good to anoint bleare-eyes withall

1608 EEBO A02239 Edward Grimeston, tr. | Jean François Le Petit [1546–ca. 1615] *A generall historie of the Netherlands*

The Towne of Romerswaell, the castell of Lodycke and the Scluse of Creeke was all carried away.

10. Here are further examples of no plural resolution with singular conjuncts:

1550 EEBO A15297 John Purvey [1353?–1428?] *The true copye of a prolog wrytten about two C. yeres paste by Iohn Wycklife* for which the puple of Israell and the puple of Juda was thus punishid and conquerid of heathen men

1572 EEBO A17219 John Coxe, tr. | Heinrich Bullinger [1504–1575] *Questions of religion cast abroad in Helvetia by the aduersaries of the same* For the woorde of God and the INSTITUTION of Christ was sufficient for them.

1587 EEBO A68202 Raphael Holinshed [d. 1580?] | John Hooker [ca. 1527–1601] *The first and second volumes of Chronicles* For the serpent of division, and the fier of malice, was entered into the citie, manie being inuenomed with the one, but more scaulded with the other.

1593 EEBO A15431 Andrew Willet [1562–1621] *Tetrastylon papisticum, that is, The foure principal pillers of papistrie* That the baptisme of John, and the baptisme of Christ, was one and the same in substance, and of the same efficacie and force, we prove it thus:

1602 EEBO A06131 Lodowick Lloyd [fl.1573–1610] *A briefe conference of diuers lawes diuided into certaine regiments* could not stand before the arke, where the presence of God, and the figure of Christ was,

1602 EEBO A06143 Lodowick Lloyd [fl.1573–1610] *The stratagems of Jerusalem* So the kingdome of Judah and the house of David was likewise taken by Nabuchodonozor in the eleventh yeare of Zedechiah, the last king of Judah.

1602 EEBO A19602 Simon Patrick, tr. [d.1613] | Jean de Hainault [d.1572] *The estate of the Church with the discourse of times, from the apostles vntill this present* The fall of Tyles, and the cry of persons, was horrible and fearfull.

1603 EEBO A04911 Richard Knolles [1550?–1610] *The generall historie of the Turkes* hee determined to returne againe into Thracia, because the raine of Autumnne, and the cold of Winter was now come in.

1607 EEBO A12475 Henry Ainsworth [1571–1622?] *The communion of saincts* the reward of humility and the fear of God, is riches and glory and Life.
“That were” followed by “was”

Next we see a different kind of syntax, where the larger agreement employs plural *was*, while the internal agreement is recognizably plural:

Helaman 1:7

\[ \text{Paanchi and that part of the people that were desirous that he should be their governor} \]

was exceeding wroth

Here is a close syntactic match with this curious language:

1588 EEBO A01864 R. Parke, tr. | Juan Gonzáles de Mendoza [1545–1618] *The historie of the great and mightie kingdome of China*

which was the occasion that

\[ \text{the citie and all those that were in it}, \]

was not destroyed and slayne:

Because the second part of the complex subject shows plural agreement, we naturally expect plural agreement with the full subject phrase. The foregoing examples suggest that the prominent head of the complex subject governs the larger, singular agreement. Yet it may be the case that the translator simply opted for plural *was* as a contrast with closely occurring *were*, as seems to be the case in the following example:

1580 EEBO A07911 Anthony Munday [1553–1633] *Zelauto. The fountain of fame*

\[ \text{the Ladyes and all that were present}, \]

was stroken into a great maze, some for joy clapped theyr handes, and some on the other side began to weepe:

This next excerpt is like the 1588 example except that it has an additional noun phrase:

1606 EEBO A22474 William Attersoll [d. 1640] *The badges of Christianity. Or, A treatise of the sacraments fully declared out of the word of God*

\[ \text{so the field and the cave that was therin}, \]

\[ \text{withal the trees and appurtenances that were therin}, \]

was made sure to him for a possession.

11. The following is a normal case of *was*, since singular abstract nouns often do not resolve as plural, cross-linguistically:

1608 EEBO A02239 Edward Grimeston, tr. | Jean François Le Petit [1546–ca.1615] *A generall historie of the Netherlands*

\[ \text{the keeping and possession of the goods that were in them}, \]

was delivered into the hands of them that tooke them.
The objectionable use of “they was”

Let us consider the five instances of “they was” found in the earliest text of the Book of Mormon. Most readers find this language completely unacceptable. Indeed, had Edward Spencer noticed these in 1905, it is likely he would have added it to his list of shocking grammar. Here they are:

1 Nephi 4:4
Now when I had spoken these words, THEY was yet wroth and did still continue to murmur.

Mosiah 18:17
And it came to pass that whosoever was baptized by the power and authority of God, THEY was added to his church.

Mosiah 29:36
telling them that these things ought not to be, that THEY was expressly repugnant to the commandments of God.

Alma 9:31–32
when I Alma had spoken these words, behold, the people were wroth with me because I said unto them that THEY was a hard-hearted and a stiffnecked people. And also because I said unto them that THEY were a lost and a fallen people, THEY was angry with me and sought to lay their hands upon me,

In the last example we notice close variation, in the following order: “people were”, “they was”, “they were”, “they was”. Here is an example of close variation of “they was” and “they were”, in both cases referring to plural arms:

1659 EEBO A40651 Thomas Fuller [1608–1661]  The appeal of injured innocence

The Arms of the Knights of Ely, might on a threefold title have escaped the Animadverter’s censure: First, THEY was never before printed. Secondly, the Wall whereon THEY were depicted, is now demolished.

Here is another example, without variation, but where “they was fitted” clearly references plural ships.

In Early Modern English, “they was” was a minor variant of heavily dominant “they were”, with low but varying rates of use depending on the dialect and other factors. The usage rate in the Book of Mormon is also low, less than 1%.

Mosiah 18:17, shown above, has “whosoever was baptized . . . they was . . . .”, which is an interesting complication. “Whosoever was” is singular on its face, but in Early Modern English it could be referenced immediately afterwards by plural pronouns. There are, of course, examples where following, referential pronouns are singular,13 but more interesting are examples containing they and its congeners:

In the 1625 example singular Bishop is immediately followed by plural they. Also, the 1671 example goes from singular to plural to

13. Examples of “whosoever was” with following singular pronouns:

1631 EeBO A01974 William Gouge [1578–1653] Gods three arrowes plague, famine, sword 
And whosoever was yet strong of body and well liking, him they presently killed;

1668 EeBO A34964 R.F. | Serenus Cressy [1605–1674] The church-history of Brittany from the beginning of Christianity to the Norman conquest 
that whosoever was seen to have it in his hands, they foolishly shew’d the same respect and veneration to him,

Whosoever was strong of Body, and in good liking they killed; upon presumption that he had some secret stores, . . .
These passages suggest that the third-person plural pronouns act as indefinite singular pronouns. Wherefore it is possible that Mosiah 18:17 contains an instance of indefinite singular they:

And it came to pass that whosoever, was baptized by the power and authority of God, they singular i was added to his church.

If that is the sense, then was might signal that fact. In any event, it’s an intriguing possibility.

Here are more examples of Early Modern English “they was” with close variation:

14. More examples of “whosoever was” followed by plural pronouns:

1578 EEBO A06590 John Lyly [1554?–1606] Euphues. The anatomy of wyt
If this order had not bene in our predecessors, Pithagoras, Socrates, Plato, and whosoever was renowned in Greece for the glorie of wisdome: THEY had never bene eternished for wise men,

1583 EEBO A67926 John Foxe [1516–1587] Acts and monuments of matters most speciall and memorable, happenyng in the Church
Thou false heretike hast taught plainly against the vowes of Monkes, Friers, Nunnes, and Priestes, saying: that whosoever was bounde to such like vowes, they vowed themselues to the estate of damnation:

1676 EEBO A61366 Aylett Sammes [1636?–1679?] Britannia antiqua illustrata, or, The antiquities of ancient Britain derived from the Phœnicians
Now the Mysteries of these Rites were accounted so Sacred and Powerful, that whosoever was initiated in them, immediately received, as they thought, some extraordinary gifts of Holiness, . . . .

15. See the Oxford English Dictionary entry for they, pers. pron., definition B2, discussing pronominal use with singular nouns made universal, with quotations from 1526.

Here are examples of the syntax without close variation:

1525 EEBO A03315 Hieronymus Brunschwig [ca.1450–ca.1512] The noble experyence of the vertuous handy warke of surgeri
And than he wolde put in agayn the guttys / and they was so sore swollen that they cowde natbe handelyd

1658 EEBO A40227 George Fox [1624–1691] The papists strength, principles, and doctrines
when THEY was speaking of justifying by faith without the works of the Law,

1659 EEBO A52921 Humphrey Norton [fl.1655–1659] et al. New-England’s ensigne and the first relation we had was concerning him, and how THEY was laboring to save his life;

The judgement did not come upon Corah because THEY was Lay-persons,

1665 EEBO A35520 Thomas Curwen et al. An answer to John Wiggans book and though the Disciples were led into all truth by the Spirit, by which THEY was to preach the Gospel to all Nations,
1523 EEBO A71318 John Bourchier, tr. (Lord Berners) [1466/67–1533] | Jean Froissart [1338?–1410?] Chronicles

So they was a great hoost whan bothe hoostes were assembled togyder.


The reason why we were more civilized then they was, because we were not very far from the Euxime Sea,


[the Ships] entred into the River, not knowing they was departed, and were so far engaged amongst the French Ships before they were aware,

1679 EEBO A30211 John Bunyan [1628–1688] A treatise of the fear of God

by which they were brought into a bondage fear; yea they was to remember this especially.

The above excerpts contain close instances of were, clearly demonstrating that such variation was permissible. Again, this is like Alma 9:31–32, shown above, which has “they was/were/was”. In the 1523 example, was conveys a fairly typical biblical meaning of ‘became’, just as in the last instance of the Alma 9:31–32 passage.

This next example is interesting because there is no expected number resolution:

1691 EEBO A30499 John Burnyeat [1631–1690] The truth exalted

and there he did affirm in his preaching to the People, that both he and they was without the Life of both the Law and the Gospel.

Nevertheless, Early Modern English usually employed were after this compound subject. This leads us to another example of suspect Book of Mormon grammar.

1673 EEBO A40785 John Faldo [1633–1690] Quakerism no Christianity. Clearly and abundantly proved, out of the writings of their chief leaders

and so they was in the Spirit which is invisible, and not in the flesh.

1678 EEBO A30130 John Bunyan [1628–1688] Come & welcome to Jesus Christ

Fifthly, What did Eulalia see in Christ, when she said, as they was pulling her one Joynt from another;

1678 EEBO A30170 John Bunyan [1628–1688] The pilgrim’s progress from this world to that which is to come delivered under the similitude of a dream

They was then asked, If they knew the Prisoner at the Bar?


The danger they was in was more then ordinary,
Both X and Y was

In the earliest text, there is one striking instance of this syntax — conjoined nouns preceded by the conjunctive adverb *both* — without plural number resolution:

Mosiah 18:14

*both* Alma and Helam *was* buried in the water

I have located quite a few instances of this pattern in Early Modern English. With non-abstract nouns, resolution became *de rigueur* during the modern period. Besides the 1691 example, there is this pronominal one as well:


In the end, I expressly demanded his Opinion,
as that, whereto *both* he, and I *was* enjoyned

In the previous two examples, and in most that I have found of this type, a past participle is used (almost) immediately after *was*. Here is a sampling of the syntax:17

17. The following examples might be typical instances of no plural resolution with singular abstract nouns:

1583 EEBO A67926 John Foxe [1516–1587] | *Actes and monuments of matters most speciall and memorable, happenyng in the Church*

after dinner, BUTLER and SMITH *were* brought to the starre chamber before the privie Counsayle, where *both* sedition and heresie *was* obiected against them

1572 EEBO A14710 John Bridges, tr. [d.1618] | Rudolf Gwalther [1519–1586] | *Homelyes or sermons vppon the Actes of the Apostles*

this was an evident and infallible argument, that *both* sinne and death *was* vanquished

1602 EEBO A04680 Tho. Lodge, tr. [1558?–1625] | Flavius Josephus | *Works*

but *both* the hope of Caesar and the forwardnes of Aristobulus *was* overthrown through enui

1644 EEBO A57969 Samuel Rutherford [1600?–1661] | *A peaceable plea for the government of the Church of Scotland*

*both* question and cause *was* determined by the Synodical-Church

1689 EEBO A59082 Nathaniel Bacon [1593–1660] | *An historical and political discourse of the laws & government of England*

*Both* Right and Possession *was* now become theirs

1696 EEBO A46926 Richard Johnson [1573–1659?] | *The famous history of the seven champions of Christendom*

So *both* time and place *was* appointed, which was the next morning following,

by the King's Commandment,
Carmack, The Case of Plural Was • 129

1560 EEBO A09567 John Daus, tr. | Johannes Sleidanus [1506–1556] Sleidanes Commentaries

at certen howres both dynner and supper was serued

1600 EEBO A06128 Philemon Holland, tr. | Livy The Romane historie

So both citie and campe was spoiled and sacked

1650 EEBO A40681 Thomas Fuller [1608–1661] A Piskah-sight of Palestine and the confines thereof

and soon after both Temple and City was destroyed, by Vespasian and Titus his son, seventy two years after our Saviours birth

1659 EEBO A26947 Richard Baxter [1615–1691] A key for Catholicks, to open the jugling of the Jesuits

there was no monsters of filthiness, or sink, or plague of uncleanliness, with which both people and Priest was not defiled

1660 EEBO A50450 Sir George Mackenzie [1636–1691] Aretina

where by both Army and Navie was maintained

1668 EEBO A53044 Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle [1624?–1674] The description of a new world, called the blazing-world

when she saw that both Church and State was now in a well-ordered and settled condition

Singular syntax with the conjunctive adverb both and abstract conjuncts persisted more robustly. The same syntax, with animate or concrete conjuncts (as in Mosiah 18:14), was largely confined to the Early Modern period.

As X and Y was V-ing

The earliest text has no plural number resolution after the subordinating time conjunction as, at least this one time:

Alma 20:8

as Ammon and Lamoni was a journeying thither18

The following example is different, since it has conjoined plural noun phrases:

18. The other two items in Alma 20:8 are biblical: the directional adverb thither and the action preposition a, meaning 'engaged in' (see OED a, prep.1 definition 13; cf. “as he was yet a coming” [Luke 9:42]). We also see “a journeying” in the following example:

1661 EEBO A42833 Joseph Glanvill [1636–1680] The vanity of dogmatizing

wherein other spirits are continually a journeying.
Helaman 5:2

For as their laws and their governments were established by the voice of the people

Here are late 17th-century examples with plural was:

1669 EEBO A66812 Thomas Bayly [d.1657?] Witty apophthegms
not long time had passed before it happened, that as himself and train was riding through the streets to see how well this order was put in execution

1676 EEBO A53472 Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery [1621–1679] Parthenissa, that most fam’d romance
I met the generous Falintus at his Landing, as Ventidius and I was diverting our selves upon a pleasant Strand, not far from his Palace

1682 EEBO A30018 Richard Brathwaite, tr. [1588?–1673] | Heinrich Bünting [1545–1606] The travels of the holy patriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, our Saviour Christ and his apostles
as Peter and John was going into the Temple by this Gate, they healed a man that had been born lame from his Mothers Womb, Acts. 3.

1686 EEBO A56820 John Pearson [1613–1686] Antichristian treachery discovered
as he and I was speaking together concerning the payment of Tythes

In the publicly available subset of Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO–TCP ›http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/›) there are examples of this syntax dated 1718 (“as my Wife and I was sitting together”) and 1756 (“as if Heaven and Earth was coming together”). So the usage continued into the modern period, dropping off in use in standard modern English.

King and people

Here is another case of unexpected singular was:

Mosiah 21:33

[ KING Limhi and MANY OF HIS PEOPLE ] was desirous to be baptized

The more common alternative in the textual record is were:

the KING and HIS PEOPLE were converted and Christened.
Nowadays we expect *were* after a combination of *king* and *people*; we expect plural number resolution. But we don’t always see that in the Early Modern era:\(^\text{19}\)

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{1581} EEBO A06481  Thomas Lupton  \textit{A persuasion from papistrie wrytten chiefly to the obstinate, determined, and dysobedient English papists}  
\quad yet KING Aram \textit{and his people was} not blessed of God,  
\quad nor yet \textit{wer the people of God},
\item \textbf{1583} EEBO A20370  Thomas Deloney, tr. [1543?–1600] | Bonaventure Des Périers [1500?–1544?]  \textit{The mirrour of mirth and pleasant conceits}  
\quad that the \textit{KINGE and all his people was} so amased with feare,  
\quad that they fel downe as deade:
\end{itemize}

The 1581 example has close variation: “\textit{were the people}” comes right after “\textit{king and people was}”. Many of these examples suggest that such immediate variation was not only permissible, but even embraced in Early Modern English. The Book of Mormon exhibits this same phenomenon quite often, as in this example:

\begin{quote}
Alma 21:21  
And he did also declare unto them that \textit{they were a people which was} under him and that \textit{they were} a free people,
\end{quote}

In looking for “king and people” agreement syntax, I encountered the following:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{1494} EEBO A00525  Robert Fabyan [d.1513]  \textit{Chronicle} (1533)  
\quad so that whan all \textit{THINGES necessarye}  
\quad to the honoure and nede of the kynge and his people \textit{was} redy,
\end{itemize}

Here are two examples of \textit{was} used right after plural noun phrases:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{1523} EEBO A71318  John Bourchier, tr. (Lord Berners) [1466/67–1533] | Jean Froissart [1338?–1410?]  \textit{Chronicles}  
\quad \textit{Whan the frenche kyngis batayls [i.e. battalions] was} ordred  
\quad and every lorde under his banner among their owne men:
\end{itemize}

\(^{19}\) The following examples containing the preposition \textit{with} more naturally take singular \textit{was} and are usually deemed to be prescriptively correct. This syntax may have contributed to \textit{was} usage after the conjunction:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{1533} EEBO A00525  Robert Fabyan [d.1513]  \textit{Chronicle} (1533)  
\quad and the \textit{kyenge with his people was} receyved into the cytye.
\item \textbf{1583} EEBO A67922  John Foxe [1516–1587]  \textit{Actes and monuments of matters most speciall and memorable, happenyng in the Church}  
\quad that the \textit{KING wt [i.e. with] HIS PEOPLE was} not able to resist them.
This is low-frequency language in both the Early Modern period and the Book of Mormon, as in the following example (with close variation):

Mosiah 18:26
And the priests was not to depend upon the people for their support, but for their labor they were to receive the grace of God,

“So great was” with plural noun phrases

In this next group of examples, the Book of Mormon employs singular was after the adjective great and before plural noun phrases:

1 Nephi 17:2
And so great was the blessings of the Lord upon us

2 Nephi 3:4
And great was the covenants of the Lord which he made unto Joseph.

Mosiah 24:10
And . . . so great was their afflictions that they began to cry mightily to God.

Alma 4:3
and so great was their afflictions that every soul had cause to mourn,

There is variation in the text; three times we read plural were in this context:

3 Nephi 8:22
for so great were the mists of darkness which were upon the face of the land.

Mormon 5:6
for so great were their numbers that they did tread the people of the Nephites under their feet.

Ether 15:16
And so great were their cries, their howlings and lamentations that it did rend the air exceedingly.

20. The resumption of “cries, howlings, lamentations” as singular it is reminiscent of Tyndale, and these other two examples:
Here are several Early Modern English examples of the type “(so) great was • PLURAL NOUN PHRASE”:

1571 EEBO A10649 Richard Rainolde [d.1606] A chronicle of all the noble emperours of the Romaines
  so great was the calamities of those dayes in the often chaunge of Princes and officers

1660 EEBO A26603 George Monck, Duke of Albemarle [1608–1670] The declaration and speech . . . to the right honourable the Lord Mayor, aldermen and common-council of the city of London
  Upon which, great was the acclamations of the people

1670 EEBO A47947 G.H., tr. | Gregorio Leti [1630–1701] The history of the cardinals of the Roman Church
  Yet so great was the differences amongst them,

1698 EEBO A55340 Andrew Tooke, tr. [1673–1732] | François Pomey [1618–1673] The Pantheon representing the fabulous histories of the heathen gods and most illustrious heroes
  they are called Hercules Labors, so great was the pains and so infinite the Toil of them.

These next two excerpts deserve special notice because they contain close variation in verb agreement:

1602 EEBO A19029 William Clowes [ca.1540–1604] A right fruteful and approoued treatise, for the artificiall cure of that malady called in Latin Struma, and in English, the evil
  for great was the troubles and daungers that was like to haue followed, but happily were they preuented through the helpe of Almighty God, &c.

1673 EEBO A41204 Francis Kirkman, tr. [1632–ca.1680] | Jerónimo Fernández Don Bellianis of Greece, or, The honour of chivalry
  Great was the preparations that were made for the Solemnity of the Wedding betwéen the Prince of Greece and the fair Princess of Babylon

1530 EEBO A13203 William Tyndale, tr. [d.1536] [The Pentateuch]
  when they sawe the Londe of Jaeser and the Londe of Gilead that it was an apte place for catell

1655 EEBO A40897 Ralph Farmer The great mysteries of godlinesse and ungodlinesse
  So sharp and hot were the flames thereof, that it made the maker of the whole creation grone and cry out,

1680 EEBO A26808 William Bates [1625–1699] The soveraign and final happiness of man
  Such were the most precious merits of his Obedience, that it was not only sufficient to free the guilty contaminated race of Mankind from Hell, . . . .
The variation seen in the 1673 example is similar to the following:

Omni 1:27

for there was a large number which were desirous
to possess the land of their inheritance;

This next pair of examples also have similar syntax:

1535 EEBO A10349 Miles Coverdale, tr. [1488–1568] Biblia the Byble, that is, the holy Scrypture of the Olde and New Testament, faithfully translated in to Englyshe

And they perceaved that it was they which were come agayne out of captivyte,

3 Nephi 10:12

and it was they which had not shed the blood of the saints which were spared.

“There was” with plural noun phrases

There are quite a few instances of “there was + <PLURAL NOUN PHRASE>” in the earliest text. This syntax was not uncommon in the Early Modern period. Here are sets of examples that show a high degree of correspondence:

Ether 13:18

there was many PEOPLE which was slain by the sword

1687 EEBO A47127 George Keith [1639?–1716] The benefit, advantage and glory of silent meetings

there was many PEOPLE both in that Nation and elsewhere, in whom there was some true DESIRES and BREATHINGS raised and begot

1 Nephi 18:25

we did find upon the land of promise as we journeyed in the wilderness that there was BEASTS in the forests of every kind

1598 EEBO A05569 William Phillip, tr. | Jan Huygen van Linschoten [1563–1611] His discours of voyages into ye Easte & West Indies

When the Portingales first discouered it, there was not any BEASTS, nor fruite, at all within the Iland

1635 EEBO A01108 Luke Foxe [1586–1635] North-west Fox, or, Fox from the North-west passage

for there was WHALES, SEA-MORS, and SEALES,
Alma 4:9

*there was* envyings and strife and malice and persecutions and pride,

1688 EEBO A56509 John Partridge [1644–1715] *An astrological judgment on the great and wonderful year 1688*

At that time *there was* murmurings and plottings against the then Oppressors

3 Nephi 8:7

And *there was* exceeding sharp lightnings such as never had been known in all the land.

1654 EEBO A91909 John Robotham [fl.1654] *The mystery of the two witnesses unveiled*

And *there was* lightnings, and voyces, and thundrings, and an earthquake, and great haile.

Mormon 9:19

And if *there was* miracles wrought, then why has God ceased to be a God of miracles and yet be an unchangeable Being?

1688 EEBO A56539 Joseph Walker | Blaise Pascal [1623–1662] *Monsieur Pascall's thoughts, meditations, and prayers, touching matters moral and divine*

*there was* also greater miracles wrought in behalf of Truth.

Ether 13:26

And *there was* robbers, and in fine, all manner of wickedness upon all the face of the land.

1667 EEBO A40122 George Fox [1624–1691] *The arraignment of popery*

when Christ was crucified, *there was* two thieves crucified, and one of the thieves reviled Christ

**Conclusion**

The foregoing textual examples show us that the earliest text of the Book of Mormon contains a wide range of diverse expression that matches the Early Modern period, at times unexpectedly. Thanks to the ground-breaking work of Royal Skousen, and texts/corpora provided by EEBO–TCP, ECCO–TCP, Google books, and Mark Davies, this study has been possible. They have provided heretofore inaccessible evidence that it
is reasonable to consider the past-tense verb agreement found in the Book of Mormon to be well-formed Early Modern English. It bears repeating that this view of the earliest text is a comprehensive one that is explanatory. From this rich perspective, the Book of Mormon is full of beautiful old language and intriguing linguistic variation.

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