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**Title** Keep the Old Wine in Old Wineskins: The Pleasing (Not Pleading) Bar of God

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**Abstract** Welch discusses the use of the phrase *pleasing bar* in the Book of Mormon. Whereas scholar Royal Skousen argues that the word *pleasing* should actually be *pleading*, Welch claims that it should remain as it is.

# KEEP THE OLD WINE IN OLD WINESKINS: THE PLEASING (NOT PLEADING) BAR OF GOD

John S. Welch

In a FARMS Update in 2004,<sup>1</sup> revised in his 2005 *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*<sup>2</sup> and supplemented in a subsequent issue of *Insights*,<sup>3</sup> Professor Royal Skousen recommends that the two occurrences of the phrase *pleasing bar* in the Book of Mormon—namely, “the pleasing bar of God” in Jacob 6:13 and “the pleasing bar of the great Jehovah” in Moroni 10:34—should, in both instances, be conjecturally emended to change the word *pleasing* to *pleading*.

Without doubt, conjectural emendation is the most hazardous tool on the workbench of the textual critic. Conjectural emendations need to be proposed with caution and should be adopted only when the weight of the evidence so requires (not when the suggested revision is merely possible or even plausible). Bruce M. Metzger, one of the most respected names in New Testament textual criticism, has said, “If the only reading, or each of several variant readings, which the documents of a text supply is impossible or incomprehensible, the editor’s only remaining resource is to conjecture what the original reading must have been.”<sup>4</sup> Professor Skousen essentially agrees: “The crucial

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1. Royal Skousen, “The Pleading Bar of God,” Update no. 172, *Insights* 24/4 (2004): 2–3.

2. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Two: 2 Nephi 11–Mosiah 16* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 1047.

3. Royal Skousen, “The Archaic Vocabulary of the Book of Mormon,” *Insights* 25/5 (2005): 2–6.

4. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 182.

restriction on conjectural emendation is that there must be something actually wrong with the earliest extant reading.”<sup>5</sup>

Skousen, however, never shows, nor even claims, that *pleasing bar* as used in Jacob 6:13 and Moroni 10:34 is actually wrong. Indeed, his conviction seems to fluctuate from the modest view that *pleasing bar* was a “possible error,”<sup>6</sup> to an outright “error,”<sup>7</sup> to “problematic,”<sup>8</sup> to a “possible misinterpretation.”<sup>9</sup> So readers are left to wonder how a conjectural emendation is justified in this case.

As I understand Skousen’s position, he theorizes alternatively that (a) in the translation process Joseph Smith twice could have seen the phrase *pleading bar* (with his natural or spiritual eyes) and then dictated it to his scribe Oliver Cowdery, and that in both cases Cowdery erroneously wrote down *pleasing bar*; or that (b) Joseph himself could have been responsible for the “misreading,”<sup>10</sup> apparently meaning either that, having received the allegedly revealed phrase *pleading bar*, he erroneously dictated the phrase *pleasing bar*, or that he could have received and dictated the phrase *pleading bar* but, in his later rereadings of the Book of Mormon, he failed to notice and correct Cowdery’s “error.”<sup>11</sup> If Skousen has settled on his latest view, that *pleasing bar* is only a “possible misinterpretation,” then either of these alternatives may be untrue. As is noted above, this does not seem to be a promising foundation on which to base a conjectural emendation.

To the contrary, I undertake here to show that there is nothing “actually wrong” with the existing term, *pleasing bar*, that indeed the weight of the evidence persuades strongly against the proposed

5. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part One: 1 Nephi–2 Nephi 10*, 7.

6. Skousen, “Pleading Bar of God,” 3.

7. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part Two*, 1051.

8. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part Two*, 1052.

9. Skousen, “Archaic Vocabulary,” 6.

10. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part Two*, 1051.

11. The term *pleasing* is present in the original manuscript at Moroni 10:34 but not at Jacob 6:13, possibly because of a missing piece of the paper it would have been written on, and Skousen conjectures that Cowdery had interlined the word *pleasing* in that verse in the original (see Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part Two*, 1047). It seems reasonable to assume that in transcribing the printer’s manuscript, Oliver was rapidly copying what he saw and not editing as he went. But whether that interlineation happened or not, Oliver wrote the printer’s manuscript as it now appears, and the Prophet let it stand.

change, and that such a change would be wrong. The long-standing text makes ample sense. It should be retained. To borrow a familiar phrase, old wine should be kept in old wineskins.

I believe that the following ten reasons make Skousen's alternatives untenable:

First, Skousen (following Christian Gellinek, a German legal scholar) asserts that the phrase is a "textually difficult reading," apparently because, in his own view, the final judgment is never a pleasing time for the wicked (he quotes such verses as Jacob 6:9, "to stand with shame and awful guilt before the bar of God"). But that criticism ignores the fact that Jacob 6:13 can be understood as implying that while the final judgment is pleasing for the righteous, it will not be so for the wicked. In other words, just as the "pleasing word of God" (Jacob 2:8, 9; 3:2) is naturally pleasing to the righteous yet hard for the wicked, the same can be said for the "pleasing bar of God" in Jacob 6:13. The candidates who appear before the judgment seat will include those who will receive the final invitation to enter into the celestial kingdom as kings and queens, priests and priestesses, the ultimate crowning of the faithful; or as Jacob says more briefly in Jacob 6:11 (just before referring to the judgment bar as "pleasing"), "Enter in at the strait gate, and continue in the way which is narrow, until ye shall obtain eternal life." Is that not a pleasing prospect?

In fact, Jews anciently welcomed God's judgment and saw it as a moment of vindication for his people, not as a terrifying and foreboding event. Thus, as C. S. Lewis astutely observed in his classic *Reflections on the Psalms*, it is Christians who tend to see the final judgment as a courtroom proceeding in which they position themselves as the accused in a criminal case "with [the Christian] himself in the dock, the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The Christian hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon, the Jew hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages."<sup>12</sup> Thus the idea of Jacob's "pleasing bar" is not problematic if one emphasizes an Israelite background for Jacob's introduction of this phrase in Jacob

12. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1986), 10. I thank my son John W. Welch for this reference.

Read this perspective!

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6:13. In fact, Jacob speaks like the Israelite he is when he sees the judgment bar of God as a “pleasing bar” but warns that this “bar striketh the wicked with awful dread and fear” (Jacob 6:13).

Second, unlike the simple terms *bar* or *judgment bar*, the term *pleading bar* was unknown in the United States judicial system in the late 1820s, in American literature, and in the King James Bible (in which, incidentally, there is also no reference to a “pleading bar,” nor even to a “judgment bar” or “bar of God”). Skousen does not appear to contend otherwise. Indeed, since he believes that Joseph as translator did nothing but read the revealed words and pronounce them for the scribe, he may be taking the position that it is not important that the phrase *pleading bar* was totally unknown to the Americans of 1829, including Joseph Smith.

Third, in his latest published FARMS Update, Skousen advances the theory that the entire Book of Mormon was revealed in an archaic English vocabulary containing a number of words the meanings of which had significantly changed long before 1829. This is a theory to be addressed elsewhere, except to note that if it is correct, Book of Mormon readers cannot always get a correct meaning without resorting to the *Oxford English Dictionary* or its equivalent, leaving one to wonder why the Lord would want to make the Book of Mormon that much harder to read and understand, and why the Lord would do that in the case of the Book of Mormon while giving the Doctrine and Covenants to his weak servants in “the manner of their language” (D&C 1:24), not Wycliffe’s or Tyndale’s.

Fourth, without offering any linguistic evidence that any judge or attorney or legislator in the British Empire or in the United States ever used *pleading bar*, Skousen refers to this phrase as a “legal term,” implying to the casual reader that it was a part of ordinary courtroom vocabulary. He cites only two Internet postings that contain the term (referring to a 1944 British film and a tour of an English village, which he calls “historical information”) and two seventeenth-century literary usages of the term in England (one from a five-act play, and the other from an English translation of an Italian poem). He refers also to three pictures of courtrooms in *The English Legal Heritage*, two of

which show a defendant standing in the **traditional dock of the British criminal court**, but as Skousen acknowledges,<sup>13</sup> the phrase *pleading bar* does not accompany these pictures or any others like them in that book.

**Fifth**, even if these few archaic and obscure British nonlegal uses were known in America in 1829, that would **carry little weight**. British and American usage of our shared language is **widely divergent**, especially in the legal sphere. Indeed, the place in the British justice system where prisoners are arraigned and then held for trial is now, and has been since at least 1624 per the *Oxford English Dictionary*, **known as the “dock” or “bail dock”** (not the “pleading bar” or “bar”). But even the British term *dock* is not used in the United States in this context.<sup>14</sup>

**Sixth**, *pleading bar* describes an **assumed physical courtroom** feature for which we have **no scriptural, historical, or legal authority** either in human or divine contexts. To American readers of the Book of Mormon, it would not have brought up a familiar image, for prisoners in this country stood before the bench for arraignment, not behind the railing, if any, that separated the spectators from the business of the court. Thus, **the idea of a *pleasing bar* speaks not to a physical fixture but only to the high quality of the experience at the bar of God for those who have kept his commandments or have repented in a proper and timely manner.**

**Seventh**, Skousen appears to see Oliver Cowdery as being not very bright or articulate, having a limited vocabulary and “a predilection to misinterpret unfamiliar expressions.”<sup>15</sup> **Predilection? Cowdery was bright and eventually became a practicing attorney.** And, if the long footnote at the end of Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great

13. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part Two*, 1052.

14. Interestingly, modern American courts do use the term *pleading bar*, but exclusively in a completely different context. This technical legal term refers to a written pleading (that is, a filed complaint or answer to complaint) that is so compelling as to render any pleading in opposition to it inadmissible. In other words, a “pleading bar” is a pleading of force sufficient to “bar” any further pleadings and thus wins the case or issue completely. Obviously, this meaning cannot be aptly inserted into the relevant verses in Jacob or Moroni.

15. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part Two*, 1051.

Price is any indicator, *Cowdery was not vocabulary-challenged*. One who can describe “opposition” as the “frowns of bigots and the calumny of hypocrites” would not likely have been disconcerted by the term *pleading bar*. But Skousen theorizes that when Cowdery heard a dictated term that he did not properly grasp, he substituted another term (a homophone or near homophone) with which he was more familiar. Examples given are *weed* for *reed*, *bosom* for *besom*, *arrest* for *wrest*, *drugs* for *dregs*, and *fraction* for *faction*,<sup>16</sup> all of which were corrected in the 1830 edition or in subsequent editions. In contrast, however, the phrase *pleasing bar* in Jacob 6:13 and Moroni 10:34 is in the printer’s manuscript and has remained unchanged in every subsequent edition of the Book of Mormon. The words *reed*, *arrest*, *dregs*, and *faction*, as well as *weed*, *wrest*, *drugs*, and *fraction*, are cases where Cowdery surely knew these words and *simply misheard* what *was dictated* in those four instances. Such substitutions would seem to have resulted simply from a tired scribe momentarily losing focus or responding to sounds phonetically and not sentiently, as can ordinarily happen in the case of any person taking reasonably rapid and lengthy dictation. Likewise with “I will sweep it with the bosom of destruction.” Since that phrase makes no sense at all, it could hardly have been the result of Cowdery’s alleged “predilection to misinterpret unfamiliar expressions.” But the phrase *pleasing bar* could not have been more familiar and more preferable to Cowdery’s ear than *pleading bar*. He probably had never heard either term. And, when he wrote Jacob 6:13, he had already heard and correctly written the words *plead* or *pleadeth* five times in 1 Nephi, 2 Nephi, and Jacob and had already heard and correctly written the word *please* or *pleased* three times in 2 Nephi. Before he wrote Moroni 10:34, he had already heard and correctly written the words *plead*, *pleadeth*, *pleaded*, or *pleading* fourteen times in Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and Ether and had heard the word *please* or *pleased* five times in Mosiah, Alma, 3 Nephi, and Ether. Thus, these cases of homophones or near homophones do not seem to present sufficient grounds for concluding that Cowdery heard and misunderstood *pleading bar* and wrongly wrote *pleasing bar*.

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16. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants, Part Two*, 1050.



**Eighth,** with plenty of opportunity to correct the text, Joseph Smith, who made many other changes in the Book of Mormon, never deleted the word *pleasing* and replaced it with another. Especially when one realizes that this phrase appears conspicuously in the final verse of the Book of Mormon and also noticeably in the next-to-last line of chapter 4 in the book of Jacob in the 1830 edition, it is very difficult to believe that Joseph did not know the phrase was there in those two places and therefore accidentally left them in place.

**Ninth,** Skousen states, “Phonetically, the words pleading and pleasing are nearly identical.”<sup>17</sup> If this means that the two words sound alike, one may certainly disagree. It doesn’t take a linguist to know that one of these words has a hard *d* sound in the middle and the other a distinct *z* sound and that these sounds are easily distinguished by one with normal hearing. Vocalizing them consecutively makes the point quite clearly.

**Tenth,** and most importantly, changing *pleasing bar* to *pleading bar* in the context of the final judgment would produce a doctrinal anomaly. None now exists as the text reads. It seems to me that modifying the term *bar of God* with the adjective *pleading* is what would be “textually difficult.” There are important theological reasons:

1. The idea of a candidate for a degree of glory pleading as an accused criminal at the final judgment has no scriptural or historical basis (no matter whether the setting of the final judgment is mentally pictured as a judgment seat, the throne of God, a tribunal, a strait gate, a veil, or a courtroom). That idea is no more scripturally endorsed than is the enticing “few stripes” conceit so graphically denounced in 2 Nephi 28:8. Why would Jacob or Moroni ever have visualized a candidate for a degree of glory (not a shackled prisoner or an accused person or a defendant, mind you) coming before the judgment seat of the Savior as the Divine and Omniscient Judge (who already knows all the facts) and being asked, “How do you plead, guilty or not guilty?” What could possibly be the purpose of such a question? What would be the value to the Divine Judge of an answer? The final judgment does not seem to me to be a trial scene—a hearing for the purpose of

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17. Skousen, “Pleading Bar of God,” 2.

fact-finding or for distinguishing between truth and falsehood—and accordingly, there should be no need for a jury to be on hand to help the Judge (and likewise no reason to assume that if there were a jury it would be composed of the Twelve Apostles, as Skousen suggests).<sup>18</sup> Judgment will be based on the matters recorded in the “books” kept in heaven and on earth. The Keeper of the Gate will already know whether I am a “sheep” or a “goat.”

2. There is no scriptural basis for the idea that pleading for mercy will be a part of the final judgment. The time and place for repentance is “the day of this life” (Alma 34:32). When the time comes for the final assignment to kingdoms of glory, the opportunity for mercy will have expired (see Alma 42:4). Some sins committed in mortality are unforgivable at any stage of progression, some must be repented of in mortality, and others may be repented of in the spirit prison; but so far as the scriptures say, there is no possibility of effective repentance at the final judgment. The only mercy that will satisfy the demands of justice flows from the atonement, and it is fully beneficial only on the basis of timely repentance and forgiveness.

3. While the Savior is often spoken of in other contexts as our advocate (see, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 45:3), no scripture says explicitly that he will plead for us as our advocate *in the final judgment* and simultaneously act as the Judge.

Thus, the idea of pleading at the judgment bar (whether by the Savior or by candidates for a degree of glory) would be injected for the first time into the standard works by this proposed emendation. It could fuel an incorrect and misleading expectation of what will happen there.

In summary, based on these ten points, I see no viable basis for accepting the proposed conjectural emendation to replace the traditional *pleasing bar* with the problematical phrase *pleading bar*. Bruce Metzger has stated that “before a conjecture can be regarded as even probable, . . . (1) it must be intrinsically suitable, and (2) it must be such as to account for the corrupt reading or readings in the transmit-

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18. Skousen draws this reading without justification from 1 Nephi 12:9. There were no juries, however, in Hebrew or Nephite courts.

ted text. . . . We require of a successful conjecture that it shall satisfy [these tests] absolutely well. The conjecture does not rise [above] ‘a happy guess’ . . . unless its fitness is exact and perfect.”<sup>19</sup> This proposal does not pass these tests. There is no adequate reason to think that Jacob and Moroni would have engraved the words equivalent to *pleading bar* on the gold plates, that the words *pleading bar* would have been revealed to Joseph Smith in the translation process, that Joseph would have thought of them himself, or that he would have dictated them to Oliver Cowdery. The term *pleasing bar* should be retained in the Book of Mormon, where it has been since 1829.

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19. Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 182–83.

