



1-1-2016

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Stokes, Adam Oliver (2016) "Mixing the Old with the New: The Implications of Reading the Book of Mormon from a Literary Perspective," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol25/iss1/8>

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Mixing the Old with the New: The Implications of Reading the Book of Mormon from a Literary Perspective

Adam Oliver Stokes

GRANT HARDY HAS PRODUCED SOME OF THE MOST significant scholarship on the Book of Mormon in the past decade. Hardy represents, for twenty-first-century literary and text criticism on the Book of Mormon, what the late, great Dr. Hugh Nibley represented for philological and archaeological studies of the Book of Mormon in the mid- and late-twentieth century. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* serves as the follow-up to Hardy's groundbreaking edition of the sacred text, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, published seven years prior.

Since *Understanding the Book of Mormon* is itself over half a decade old, this review will only briefly address the content of the work, itself summarized and critiqued by various readers, and instead focus on the implications of Hardy's work for current theological issues within the larger Latter-day Saint tradition. Particular emphasis will be given to the ramifications of Hardy's exegetical approach for recent debates about the status and role of the Book of Mormon within the reviewer's own tradition, the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints).

A brief overview of *Understanding the Book of Mormon*

In the introduction to his work, Hardy states that his overall purpose is to “suggest that the Book of Mormon can be read as literature—a genre that encompasses history, fiction, and scripture—by anyone trying to understand this odd but fascinating book” (p. xiv).¹ He goes on to argue that “reading the Book of Mormon well . . . requires a recognition of the central role played by its three major narrators: Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni” (p. xiv). Hardy’s comments here provide a foretaste of the literary approach he will utilize throughout the rest of the book since he looks specifically at these three figures as literary characters.

Hardy is largely successful in his agenda, which is to present the Book of Mormon as literature over and above scripture. In doing so, he avoids the type of apologetic approaches prevalent in Latter-day Saint literature. Ironically, Hardy brings his literary characters to life in a way that, as will be discussed later, has significant theological implications. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* is divided into three parts, each part focusing on a different narrator. Hardy’s greatest contribution here is showing how Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni represent distinct and even flawed personalities.

As someone whose favorite section of the Book of Mormon is 1–2 Nephi, I have always been frustrated at the seeming inerrancy of Nephi as being an impossible ideal to emulate. Hardy reveals the cracks in Nephi’s apparently unshakable persona in what Nephi leaves unsaid in his account of his family’s journey from the old promised land to the new. For example, while Nephi presents himself as the new Joseph of the family even before Lehi’s death, Hardy correctly observes that Nephi glosses over the fact that Lehi viewed another one of his sons as this neo-Joseph, giving his sixth son, not Nephi, Joseph’s name. Furthermore, the final division between Nephi and his brothers in 2 Nephi, resulting in the Nephite and Lamanite tribes, is largely viewed by Nephi himself as a victory in that it provides evidence of God’s favor on him

1. Internal references refer to Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

and his family. Hardy notes that this division, when looked at in its larger context, represents Nephi's failure to fulfill the commandments of his father. In contrast to Nephi, Lehi had hoped for reconciliation between the brothers and the restoration of their ties of affection.

Hardy makes similar observations about Mormon and the way that he abridges and edits the material handed down to him on the gold plates. While tradition has highlighted Mormon in a manner similar to Nephi, Hardy notes that Mormon reveals little about his personal character and that at best we get a "gradual self-disclosure" (p. 111) of the sage and his concerns and interests. For both Mormon and Moroni, the last figure examined, Hardy intersperses his observations with detailed commentary on certain sections of their respective edits as representative of their unique concerns and emphases. For Mormon, Hardy gives Mosiah 15–16 (RLDS Mosiah 8) as an example, and for Moroni, the book of Ether, specifically chapter 12 (RLDS Mosiah 5).

Understanding the Book of Mormon concludes with a discussion of the interpretive history of the Book of Mormon, where Hardy correctly observes that the text "has outgrown its American roots and can now be comfortably regarded as world scripture" (p. 270). As such, Hardy appeals for an orientation toward the book similar to how religion scholars approach other sacred texts—the Qur'an, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament—as literature (and hence through the lens of literary criticism). Hardy is optimistic that this will happen and notes that "the most promising academic approaches to the Book of Mormon may come from the field of religious studies" (p. 269).

Implications of Hardy's approach for various LDS perspectives toward the Book of Mormon

In the preface, Hardy states that his intention "is not to move readers from one side to the other but rather to provide a way in which they can speak across religious boundaries and discuss a remarkable text with some degree of rigor and insight" (p. 27). Hardy suggests that he will look at the Book of Mormon in a nonpartisan way. In theory, this liberates him

from any apologetic discussion of the text and consequently allows him to examine it from a literary perspective. One might say that what Hardy tries to do for Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni is similar to Jack Miles's efforts with the Old Testament Jehovah and the New Testament Christ, restricting them solely to the status of literary characters.

At the same time, by nature of its subject and by the very fact that Hardy treats the Book of Mormon characters as literary figures with their own personality and views, his book unintentionally raises a host of apologetic issues. After reading *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (and after reading the Book of Mormon itself), I came away even more convinced that the Book of Mormon is an actual translation of an ancient document and not a "tall tale" invented by an imaginative Joseph Smith. Several observations made by Hardy regarding the unique features of the various sections of the book support this conclusion: terminology exclusive to King Benjamin and Alma in the book of Mosiah (pp. 133–35); the "unfinished nature of Helaman's book" within Mormon's history (p. 143); the Priestly (P) language used by Abinadi and his summary of the Ten Commandments in his defense to King Noah; and multiple phrases either limited to the Book of Mormon or rarely used in the Bible, suggesting that they do not merely represent the King James vocabulary so influential on the Prophet's interaction with the Old Testament.

Even in his attempt to steer away from any type of apologetic, Hardy cannot separate himself completely from such concerns as he admits in his treatment of the speeches of King Benjamin and Alma where he writes:

We might wonder if verbal parallels indicate deliberate quotations and allusions, or whether they might best be explained as due to the common language and phrasing of Joseph Smith, either as translator or as author. *Yet there are many instances where the correspondence between phrases is unique, or nearly so.* (p. 133, emphasis added)

One detects in Hardy's overall work a desire to move forward in regard to academic study of the Book of Mormon, as was seen earlier in

his statement about the Book of Mormon needing to be studied as part of a larger canon of world scripture and apart from its implications for the LDS community. Yet, the future of Mormon studies requires moving backward in order to move forward. By this, I mean that the apologetic concerns and questions that have dogged the Book of Mormon from its initial publication must be addressed by modern religious scholars in order to, consequently, address many of the contemporary issues surrounding the text.

Examination of a religious text, even from a literary perspective, cannot (and does not) happen apart from the community for whom the text was written. Hence, Western scholars studying Islam's central book, the Qur'an, from an academic perspective do so not in a vacuum but to explain and comment on the state of Islam at the present time and its implications for relations between the West and the Middle East. This is precisely the type of work that we find among such prominent Christian scholars as Bruce Lawrence at Duke University and Miroslav Volf at Yale.

In other words, modern perspectives on scripture, whether deliberately or not, in some way always comment on the concerns involving the community from which that scripture arose. To use a more personal example, as someone who teaches classical languages, even "defunct" scriptures such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are studied and treated for the purpose of addressing the concerns of classicists. Why approach Homer from a literary perspective? In order to determine, as Paul Verne attempts to do, whether the ancient Greeks for whom Homer was the Bible actually believed in the gods depicted by the poet. In short, Hardy's work has significance for the LDS community whether he wants to admit this or not, and it would be great to see Hardy deliberately explore this significance in a later, follow-up work.

On several levels, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* is relevant to the current debate over the Book of Mormon within my own tradition: the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, now called the Community of Christ. There is deep division over the status of the Book of Mormon in my tradition. The official view, provided below, is summarized on the Community of Christ website under "basic beliefs."

We affirm the Bible as the foundational scripture for the church. In addition, Community of Christ uses the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants—not to replace the witness of the Bible or improve on it, but because they confirm its message that Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God.²

At the same time, the Community of Christ has increasingly moved toward the position that the Book of Mormon should be viewed as literature rather than as scripture or even historical fact. Such a perspective was seen most notably in the following statement made by former President W. Grant McMurray in 2001: “The proper use of the Book of Mormon as sacred scripture has been under wide discussion in the 1970s and beyond, in part because of long-standing questions about its historicity and in part because of perceived theological inadequacies, including matters of race and ethnicity.”³ President McMurray’s comments here are in large part a response to the criticism leveled against the Book of Mormon, and against Mormonism in general, by non-Mormons. In this respect, President McMurray does nothing new. Yet the type of response he gives represents a significant departure from that traditionally provided by members of the LDS tradition. It can be argued that it represents an acceptance of the dominant, non-Mormon view that the Book of Mormon is historically inaccurate, unsupported by archaeology, and ultimately racist in its theology and assumptions. It is ironic that such a view arose from a community that has traditionally been at the forefront of Book of Mormon apologetics as seen with the various publications that emerged from *Zarahemla Record* in the 1970s and 80s and which provided the latest archaeological and philological research related to the Book of Mormon at that time.

Further evidence of the Community of Christ’s departure from the long-standing LDS view toward the Book of Mormon was seen in 2007 when current President Stephen Veazey rejected a proposal to officially

2. See <http://www.cofchrist.org/basic-beliefs>.

3. W. Grant McMurray, “They ‘Shall Blossom as the Rose’: Native Americans and the Dream of Zion,” Independence, MO, February 17, 2001, keynote address.

affirm the text as divinely inspired scripture. Veazey stated that “while the Church affirms the Book of Mormon as scripture, and makes it available for study and use in various languages, we do not attempt to mandate the degree of belief or use. This position is in keeping with our long-standing tradition that belief in the Book of Mormon is not to be used as a test of fellowship or membership in the church.”⁴

As the above comments by Presidents McMurray and Veazey indicate, the Community of Christ provides a great case study of an LDS tradition that in many ways reads the Book of Mormon exactly as Hardy attempts to do in his work here: namely as a literary document. As expected, this has produced a significant backlash among more traditional-thinking RLDS members who have either left the church or doubled their efforts to bring the Book of Mormon back to the center of the theological and scriptural life of the church. Yet, as someone who firmly fits into the traditionalist camp and views the Book of Mormon as divinely inspired, historically accurate scripture, much of Hardy’s work served to strengthen my faith in this regard, and there is much here that other RLDS traditionalists would appreciate as well. In fact, Hardy is most successful in showing the various voices, sections, and editorial emendations made by Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni.

At the same time, Hardy’s insistence on a literary reading and his proposal that much of the Book of Mormon be viewed as a historical record rather than a theological text could apply well to the current view of the Book of Mormon within the Community of Christ. Drawing on various examples from ancient historians, Hardy notes that history does not have to mean factual but can simply represent an account of former peoples or nations as later historians have interpreted them or understood them. In this sense, the Prophet Joseph himself can be called a historian in that the Book of Mormon represents his interpretation of the history of indigenous Americans. In closing, Hardy is ultimately to be commended for his work here and, though his intention is to

4. Andrew M. Shields, “Official Minutes of Business Session, Wednesday March 28, 2007,” in 2007 World Conference Thursday Bulletin, March 29, 2007. Community of Christ, 2007.

introduce non-Mormons to the Book of Mormon (as was the case also with his edition of the Book of Mormon), his discussion works best among those within the LDS tradition, whether conservative or liberal.

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