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## On a Dawning Era for the Book of Mormon

*Joseph M. Spencer*

Review of Grant Hardy. *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 368 pp., with indexes. \$29.95 hardcover.

G. W. F. HEGEL FAMOUSLY SAID THAT the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk, that it is only as a historical sequence comes to a close that it becomes possible to reflect fully on its meaning and implications.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Terryl Givens's 2002 *By the Hand of Mormon*, a full-blooded reception history of "the American scripture that launched a new world religion," marked an important break in the history of academic study of the Book of Mormon.<sup>2</sup> Its appearance significantly coincided with the slowdown of the most intense and productive period of investigation the Book of Mormon has witnessed in the almost two centuries of its circulation. Givens thus attempted in his book not so much to take the pulse of a flourishing movement as to eulogize what had been generally regarded as a great era for academic study of the Book of Mormon. Inaugurated by Hugh Nibley and Sidney Sperry in the 1940s, becoming dormant for a period beginning in the 1960s, and reemerging with

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1. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23.

2. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

peculiar force under the guidance of John Welch and John Sorenson in the 1980s, the era whose end Givens effectively announced was dominated by an unmistakable apologetic impulse and aimed at defending the plausibility of the Book of Mormon's ancient origins.

A year after Givens's reception history appeared, the University of Illinois published Grant Hardy's *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, a reformatting of the Book of Mormon text that, more implicitly than explicitly, outlined a possible new direction for academic study of the Book of Mormon.<sup>3</sup> By aiming to provide a readable presentation of the text of the Book of Mormon, one that aimed to give center stage to the scripture's narrative, Hardy quietly announced his intention to help inaugurate an era of literary study of the Book of Mormon. Thus at the very moment that Givens marked the end of one era of Book of Mormon study, one focused particularly on questions of historicity, Hardy launched a project to establish the foundations of another era of Book of Mormon study, now to be focused particularly on questions of narrativity. And what Hardy outlined implicitly and announced quietly in 2003, he proclaimed unequivocally in 2010 with *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*. This clear companion to the *Reader's Edition* is as much a manifesto as a monograph, as much an intervention as an investigation. Of course, literary treatments of the Book of Mormon have been available for a long time, some more compelling than others.<sup>4</sup> What is unique about Hardy's study, however, is that it explicitly presents literary work on the Book of Mormon as *a way forward* for students of the Book of Mormon after a rather different era of study has passed. And Hardy makes a compelling case.

What Hardy means when he speaks of a literary reading of the Book of Mormon is in important ways different from what others might mean when using such language; what he presents is not a work of theory-laden

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3. See Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

4. See Madison U. Sowell, review of *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*, by Richard Dilworth Rust, *FARMS Review of Books* 9/2 (1997): 29–32.

comparative literature but a model of what he calls “narrator-based reading.” Arguing from within the field of religious studies, Hardy marks the uniqueness of the Book of Mormon among volumes of recently produced world scripture by pointing to its narrativity. Even though more ancient volumes of world scripture bear the characteristic of narrativity, Hardy argues that the Book of Mormon’s “extended, integrated, nonmythological, history-like narrative makes it quite distinctive” (p. 12). Motivated by this heavily narrative flavor, Hardy identifies as the key feature of the Book of Mormon’s literary structure its presentation as the work of three distinguishable narrators with different personalities and divergent agendas.<sup>5</sup> Thus in nine chapters, an introduction, and an afterword, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* focuses its efforts on discerning the characters and interests of the Book of Mormon’s three major narrators: Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. The bulk of the book is divided into three main parts, each a study of one of these figures.

On Hardy’s reading, the Book of Mormon’s major narrators—carefully and revealingly constructed within the text—are presented as drastically distinct. Nephi is a tragic figure, failing to fulfill his father’s dying request that he keep the family together and so burying himself ever deeper in the writings of arcane prophets from a tradition foreign to his own people. Mormon, in turn, is a dedicated historian with a moralizing message, struggling and often succeeding to make the recalcitrant documents of history bear witness to God’s faithfulness. Moroni, finally, is a self-conscious finisher, fretting about the myriad ways the whole project of the Book of Mormon might fail if its first readers misunderstand or dismiss it. All three figures are handlers and transmitters of texts, but each with a unique approach to the texts in his possession: Nephi focuses primarily on the texts produced by the Israelites of the Old World, relishing both their messages of doom and their messages of hope; Mormon weighs the textual remains of the thousand-year history of the Israelites

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5. Rosalynde Welch has pointed out some philosophical difficulties with this approach. See Rosalynde Welch, “Grant Hardy’s Subject Problem,” *Times and Seasons* (blog), August 16, 2011, <http://timesandseasons.org/>.

of the New World, his own people; and Moroni turns his attention to a non-Israelite nation that bridged the Old and the New Worlds, a clear parallel to the Book of Mormon's earliest nineteenth-century readers.

If Hardy has a hero, it is Mormon, whom he presents as particularly complicated and especially skilled. Where Nephi artfully but ultimately unconvincingly makes himself the uncontested hero of his writings, and where Moroni aptly but not remarkably works out his own prophetic concerns, Mormon's deft construction of his moralizing history—especially as Hardy analyzes it—takes one's breath away. Hardy gives whole chapters to Mormon's use of embedded documents of various kinds, to his construction of parallel narratives to encode moral messages, and to his constant struggle with the relationship between prophecy and history. And he provides a list of other historical, literary, and moralizing strategies in Mormon's writing that could receive as much attention (geographical notes, genealogical details, flashbacks and flash-forwards, the length of textual units, selective attention, repeated phrases, editorial insertions, typological interpretation, and so on). Whatever Nephi and Moroni have to contribute to the Book of Mormon is, on Hardy's interpretation, ancillary to Mormon's purpose: Nephi's writings are primarily prefatory to Mormon's history, and Moroni's writings are first and foremost a kind of appendix to Mormon's history.

Hardy's portraits of the Book of Mormon's chief authorial or editorial figures are very responsibly painted. They are products of sustained close reading of the text, always undertaken with an eye to large-scale questions concerning themes and motifs. Hardy thus admirably weaves together detailed readings of relatively short passages (as with, for instance, his remarkable analysis of "the record of Zeniff" in Mosiah 9–10, which reveals a profoundly sensitive voice in an often black-and-white narrative) and sweeping characterizations that make sense of whole swaths of the Book of Mormon at once (a good example is his argument that Helaman, son of Alma, is subtly presented as a poor record-keeper whose failure to produce a narrative from the records he gathered and kept left Mormon with more original sources to use in constructing his own narrative). Invariably, local,

detailed work grounds broad, global claims. There is little question whether Hardy has read the Book of Mormon well—certainly according to Hardy’s own definition of “reading well,” namely, “following the contours and structure of the text, perceiving how the parts fit into the whole, and evaluating fairly the emphases and tensions within the book” (p. xiv).

In the end, however, Hardy’s good reading, compelling as it unquestionably is, represents only *one* sort of good reading, and it should be asked both exactly how Hardy’s approach differs from what precedes it and exactly how Hardy’s approach differs from other ways one might go forward with the Book of Mormon. To what extent does *Understanding the Book of Mormon* break with the apologetic impulse? To what extent does it dispense with the historical (or perhaps historicist) commitments of its predecessors? And how might it be situated among the variety of proposals currently on offer for moving forward with academic study of the Book of Mormon?

First, then, it should be said that Hardy’s work surely remains within the category of apologetics, albeit not of apologetics in defense of specific *religious* claims. In other words, while it must be said that Hardy expresses no interest in establishing the *historical veracity* of the Book of Mormon (with all that historicity would imply about supernatural events like the visit of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith), it cannot be said that he expresses no interest in establishing *a certain truthfulness* of the Book of Mormon. His appeals to the book’s complexity and interest, its intrinsic worth and literary merits, its compelling construction and occasionally forceful ideas—these are apologetic gestures, instances of a polemic undertaken on behalf of a book few academics believe deserves sustained attention. Simply by taking as his thesis that the Book of Mormon is “better than it sounds” (p. 273), Hardy defends the book as a source of truth—albeit neither as an unequivocal source of purely objective truth nor as an uncontestable source of divinely revealed truth. The truth of the Book of Mormon as Hardy unveils it is something more like the truth about which Hans-Georg Gadamer philosophizes in his work

on the aesthetic.<sup>6</sup> To that extent at least, if Hardy's approach marks an appealing way forward for academic study of the Book of Mormon, it does not definitively dispense with the apologetic impulse.

As it turns out, Hardy's approach to the Book of Mormon does not entirely dispense with questions of history either. As he explains, his approach to the text is "not quite historical and not quite literary, because neither exactly fits the Book of Mormon" (p. xvii). It is, he says, a wrong-headed move simply to "read [the book] as a product of the nineteenth century," since "this requires treating it as an indirect or coded source; one must start with the assumption that it is something very different from what it professes to be" (p. xvii).<sup>7</sup> It is better, on Hardy's account, to confess the "history-likeness" of the Book of Mormon.<sup>8</sup> But this he takes as a spur to study the story the book sets out to tell, not as a spur to search through ancient texts or archaeological sites for corroborating (or conflicting) evidence. Hardy is more concerned to ask how the history-likeness of the Book of Mormon demands a certain sort of reading than to ask how it demands a certain set of beliefs concerning ancient history.

It should thus be said that Hardy inherits from his predecessors both a certain apologetic orientation (albeit not a traditional apologetics in defense of what are usually taken to be the Book of Mormon's truth claims) and a certain commitment to the historical nature of the Book

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6. For a summary of the relevance of Gadamer's work to Mormonism, see James E. Faulconer, "Recovering Truth: A Review of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*," *The Mormon Review: Books and Culture from an LDS Perspective* 2/2 (27 September 2010): 1–7, [www.mormonreview.org](http://www.mormonreview.org). Perhaps particularly helpful is the exchange between Faulconer and Richard Bushman at the conclusion of the essay.

7. A good example of what Hardy seems to have in mind when he speaks of "treating [the Book of Mormon] as an indirect or coded source" is Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

8. Hardy borrows the term "history-likeness" from Hans Frei, who helpfully distinguishes between "history-likeness (literal meaning) and history (ostensive reference)." See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 12.

of Mormon (albeit not overtly to the claim that the Book of Mormon makes ostensive reference to events, people, and places recoverable through the usual means of historical inquiry). He thus remains within the tradition of Book of Mormon studies even as he transforms the basic stakes of the gestures made by his predecessors. In each case, Hardy's efforts undertaken in the book's defense or in the study of the book's history-likeness are oriented by the overarching imperative to always understand the Book of Mormon better in its own right, regardless of the relationship the text might sustain with what lies outside the text. In this sense, he definitively (if not even defiantly) reverses what Givens claims has been the dominant, almost uncontested approach to the Book of Mormon: to take it as sacred signifier (of the truth or falsity of Mormonism) rather than as sacred signified (a text deserving of sustained study). For Hardy, the Book of Mormon should be signified before and almost to the exclusion of its being signifier.

On that score, Hardy finds himself in company with many other emerging students of the Book of Mormon. Even where the focus of recent Book of Mormon scholarship *is* on ancient history (as in, for instance, the most recent work by John Welch or the commentary produced by Brant Gardner), the focus is on elucidating the text of the Book of Mormon much more than on establishing the historicity of the text.<sup>9</sup> And among those approaching the Book of Mormon from disciplines other than those focused on ancient history (e.g., Jad Hatem, working in comparative religion, or myself, working in philosophy—not to mention Hardy himself), it is even clearer that the chief aim is to see what the Book of Mormon might have to say if it is read closely and inventively.<sup>10</sup> How, though, might Hardy's work be distinguished from

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9. See John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008); and Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007).

10. See Jad Hatem, *Postponing Heaven: The Three Nephites, the Mahdi, and the Bodhisattva*, trans. Jonathon Penny (forthcoming from Brigham Young University Press); and Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012).



other approaches to the Book of Mormon with which it nonetheless shares a commitment first and foremost to elucidating the text?

Here it might be helpful to distinguish, as is commonly done in biblical studies, among three distinct “worlds” to which the student of the text might address her attention. First is the world *behind* the text, the world that *produced* the text. In terms of the Book of Mormon, one might in this regard look either to the ancient world (whether to the Old or to the New World) or to nineteenth-century America (the latter not necessarily in a critical vein: many believing scholars find themselves asking what role Joseph Smith’s own cultural inculcations played in the shape of the translated text of the Book of Mormon). The idea here would be to elucidate the text of scripture by looking at how its meaning is (at least in part) determined by the forces that produced it. Second is the world *of* the text, the world portrayed by the text, *as* it is portrayed by the text. In terms of the Book of Mormon, one might in this regard look at the narrative structure of the book, or perhaps attempt to establish the critical text of the book, or perhaps compare the text to other scriptural texts (the Qur’an or the Daodejing, for instance).<sup>11</sup> The idea here would be to elucidate the text of scripture by giving attention uniquely to what it presents (and perhaps to how what it presents differs from what other texts that make similar claims to being scripture or history present). Third is the world *before* the text, the world inhabited by the readers of the text. In terms of the Book of Mormon, one might in this regard look at how the stories or ideas or structures found in the book have helped or might still help to contest contemporary thought and practice. The idea here would be to elucidate the scriptural text by showing its relevance and force, by revealing the ways in which it resists its readers.

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11. One might well wonder whether comparative scripture uniquely pays attention to the world *of* the text. But lateral comparison, rather than moving into the world *behind* or *before* the text, establishes a differential network of how various (similar) texts work on their own terms, allowing for investigation of an individual text’s meaning in a revealing way.

All three of these approaches to scripture aim at elucidating the meaning of the text, though each takes the meaning of “meaning” to be slightly different. Where those interested in the world behind the text focus on the way that meaning is determined by the causal weave of history, those interested in the world of the text focus on the way that meaning is the product of complex structures, identifiable through comparative study of similarly structured texts. Different from both of these are those interested in the world before the text, those who focus on the way that meaning is constituted through the dynamic relationship between a text and its readers. In terms of this triple typology, Hardy’s work—and larger interests—can be said to fall within the second category, interest in the world *of* (rather than *behind* or *before*) the text. That Hardy has expressed deep interest in and appreciation for Royal Skousen’s critical text project and that he has stated his interest in turning his attention to comparative scripture should come as no surprise, then. Hardy’s sights are set squarely on the study of the world *of* the text of the Book of Mormon.

There remains, however, important work to be done on the world behind the text of the Book of Mormon. And promising young scholars have emerged in recent years to undertake that sort of work: Michael MacKay, working on the nineteenth-century context of the Book of Mormon’s emergence; David Bokovoy, working on how ancient Near Eastern history might still elucidate the text of the Book of Mormon; and Mark Wright, working on how ancient Mesoamerica might help to clarify the meaning of the text. Obviously, some of this work will have appeal primarily—if not only—to believing Latter-day Saints. It is, nonetheless, work that deserves to be pursued. But more promising in my view, if only because it has been so little pursued as yet, is work on the world before the text of the Book of Mormon.

To return to Terryl Givens, it should be said that *By the Hand of Mormon* does more than just identify the transition from one era of Book of Mormon study to another; it also contributes to the conversation about what a new era of Book of Mormon study might be. Givens does this in part through his construction of a reception history. Such an approach to the Book of Mormon is itself a way of taking seriously the world before

the text: a study of how the Book of Mormon has motivated believers and unbelievers alike to respond in a variety of ways.<sup>12</sup> But what was perhaps most interesting about Givens's book was not the history of the Book of Mormon's reception so much as his provocative chapter on the Book of Mormon as "dialogic revelation," as a text that has real ideas to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the nature of God.<sup>13</sup>

There is, I think, much, much more work to do in this vein. There is, in other words, much, much more work to do on the *theological* productivity of the Book of Mormon—work that will more often than not be predicated on the kind of close textual analysis Hardy has modeled. And I find myself convinced that it is only as the Book of Mormon is given to speak directly and forcefully to the world before the text that it might gain the kind of universal appeal Hardy argues it should have. To put the point polemically, Hardy's work on the Book of Mormon—its brilliance and fruitfulness notwithstanding—cannot alone accomplish its primary purpose, which is to allow the Book of Mormon to speak with a universal voice. It cannot accomplish this purpose, that is, unless it is taken up into a theological project that reveals the ways in which the Book of Mormon contests contemporary thought and practice.

I might justify this polemical claim by providing just a brief analysis of what I find to be at once the richest and yet the most disappointing moment in Hardy's book. It comes in chapter 7, "The Day of the Lord's Coming: Prophecy and Fulfillment" (pp. 180–213). There Hardy traces the development of Mormon "from historian to prophet" at the culmination of the Third Book of Nephi. Having developed a pattern of employing the fulfillment of prophecies through history to establish God's faithfulness, Mormon finds himself forced by the Lord to cut his history short and to assume an unwanted prophetic mantle. In effect, Mormon

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12. Paul Gutjahr's *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* has recently expanded the purview of the Book of Mormon's reception history. Where Givens focuses almost exclusively on intellectual history, Gutjahr looks at the history of translation, of missiological usage, and of artist appropriation. See Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

13. See Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 209–39.

is forced to abandon his own express design to establish the truth of his record through historically verifiable data and assume a “prophetic pedagogy . . . aimed to produce a more resilient faith, a faith capable of withstanding doubts and temptations, one that transcends the historical moment” (p. 213).

Hardy’s readerly abilities are here at their peak. The details, which must be omitted here, deserve close attention, and Hardy must be said to have discovered one of the most forceful moments in the whole Book of Mormon. Nonetheless, there is something disappointing about the way that Hardy simply leaves this pregnant transformation of the Book of Mormon’s explicit project undeveloped. He notes it as if it were little more than an interesting fact. Why no discussion of how this moment in the Book of Mormon speaks to questions of what it means to write and to read texts? Why no discussion of how the transformation Mormon is forced to undergo might speak to two centuries of debate about the relationship between the prophetic and the historical when it comes to the Book of Mormon’s origins? Why no discussion of how this remarkable text might be used as a platform for outlining an approach to the status of religious faith in a world so thoroughly dominated by the scientific outlook? Why no discussion of how Mormon might be thought of as a figure for every religious believer committed to a sacred history of one sort or another? Because he does not pursue the theological implications of his readings—because he remains focused solely on the world of the text, and not on the way that that world collides with the world before the text—Hardy misses what might well be the universal voice that speaks in the Book of Mormon, the voice that can speak as much to non-Mormons as to Mormons, as much to the curious as to the deeply interested, as much to the irreligious as to the religious.

In the end, of course, this may be a minor complaint. Even the somewhat disappointed theologian cannot complain too loudly about missed opportunities in Hardy’s work—at the very least because she can take those missed opportunities as occasions for her own theological reflection. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the theologian it is worth taking notice of the danger that what Hardy calls the literary approach to

the Book of Mormon risks being a bit too academic, a bit too abstract, to have genuinely universal appeal. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* announces the possibility of a new era of Book of Mormon study with great and appreciated fanfare, but the universal voice it attempts to coax out of the Book of Mormon is perhaps still only a whisper out of the dust. If the Book of Mormon is to raise its voice, it seems to me, Hardy and others like him will need as many theologically disappointed interlocutors as they have and will have appreciative readers.

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