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Understanding *Understanding the Book of Mormon*: An Interview with Grant Hardy

JBMS: *Talk about the genesis of* Understanding *and a bit about your process of writing it, in particular its relation to your* Reader's Edition of the Book of Mormon *(University of Illinois Press, 2003).*

Hardy: *Understanding the Book of Mormon* began with the *Reader's Edition*. That earlier project—which involved a decade of experiments with formatting, drafts, proposals to publishers, revisions, and copyediting—changed the way Heather and I read the Book of Mormon. Rather than encountering it as a succession of individual verses, we started seeing it in terms of larger literary structures: paragraphs, pericopes, extended arguments, embedded documents, poetry, flashbacks, and multichapter units. At the same time, writing the section headers, adding quotation marks, and preparing the footnotes helped us better grasp the details of the text, and in particular the ways in which different parts fit together with regard to chronology, geography, internal sources, and intratextual allusions and quotations. When we first began, we weren't sure whether the book would even divide into coherent paragraphs, but the more closely we read, the more carefully constructed the narrative seemed to be. All of this naturally drew our attention to the narrators who, within the framework of the story, were responsible for all of this.

Over many years of reading drafts of the *Reader's Edition*, and of virtually nonstop conversations about the Book of Mormon (much to the dismay of our children), we felt like we were starting to have a clearer understanding of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni, who unlike their anonymous counterparts in the Bible are presented as named narrators and editors in the text, with unique biographies and sensibilities. They function as both storytellers and characters within their stories. It occurred to me that an emphasis on narrative analysis might offer common ground to Mormons and outsiders. Most Latter-day Saints believe that Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni were ancient prophet-historians; I wanted them to see these figures as narrators who shaped their source materials in deliberate, distinctive ways. Non-Mormons generally view Joseph Smith as the sole author, but even so, he would have had to imagine narrators who shaped their source materials in distinctive ways. Whether regarded as fiction or as a translation of an ancient record, the Book of Mormon can be studied in terms of the literary tools shared by both historians and novelists.

Not long after the *Reader's Edition* was published in 2003, we realized our ongoing discussions had given us enough ideas for a book. (It was important to us that the idea-to-page ratio be high; too many authors go on and on without really having anything new to say.) I began writing the first chapter of *Understanding* in the fall of 2004 while I was teaching for a semester at BYU–Hawaii, and the manuscript was ready for publication six years later. It took a while to figure out a format for the book because I wanted to do a number of things at the same time. I wanted it to be an introduction to the Book of Mormon, which meant that it had to cover the main contours of the text in order, but the chapters also needed to focus on each of the narrators in turn, along with one of their characteristic narrative techniques or concerns. In general, I was hoping to provide readings of specific passages to try to show Latter-day Saints how to be more careful readers and to try to persuade outsiders that the Book of Mormon was worth reading in the first place.

JBMS: *You are credited as the author on the cover, but your acknowledgments describe your wife Heather as a coauthor of sorts. What was her role in the writing process?*

Hardy: Heather was the primary generator of ideas. She has long been a nearly full-time reader masquerading as a stay-at-home mother. She reads over a hundred books a year, almost all nonfiction—mostly thick university press volumes on history, literature, philosophy, political theory, science, religion, and biblical studies—and she has dozens of notebooks full of quotations, observations, and critical responses to everything she reads. In addition, she reads the Book of Mormon constantly, in spiral-bound copies of pages from the *Reader's Edition* that are eventually covered with her colored pencil marks as she looks for patterns and connections within the text. Heather sees the Book of Mormon in everything, which means she returns again and again to the scriptural text with new questions, new hypotheses, and new perspectives. She also has a keen eye for how her academic reading might be useful in understanding the Book of Mormon. For instance, she was the first to realize that Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg might offer models for narrative analysis (though the Bible and the Book of Mormon differ in significant ways).[1] I read whatever books Heather strongly recommends, and when she starts talking about things she has recently noticed in the Book of Mormon, I frequently take notes—though this works better when we are talking in the kitchen or on the phone rather than in the car when I'm driving.

Heather feels an intense need to figure things out and make sense of the puzzle pieces, but she is less interested in putting her ideas into systematic form and sharing them with others. The perks of authorship don't mean much to her; she would rather move on to new discoveries. Occasionally, I can get her to take the time to write and publish her own material. By contrast, I often don't know what I think until I've put

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1. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

things into written form, and I enjoy the challenge of sifting through evidence and constructing arguments that might be persuasive. When Heather writes, she has to have everything in place in her mind before she begins, which can take a long time. I, however, start writing with little more than a rough outline, knowing that I will eventually need to do a lot of rewriting as the project takes shape.

Each chapter of *Understanding the Book of Mormon* began with me trying to put some of Heather's ideas into a systematic, fleshed-out, fully documented form, and then adding my own insights and examples. Each time I brought home a chapter, Heather covered it with comments (in red) pointing out places where the logic failed, the examples needed to be stronger, or I had misunderstood her points, but also suggesting better phrasing and alternative approaches—all of which led to further conversations. The most difficult chapter to write was the one on 3 Nephi, which went through seven nearly complete rewrites before Heather was satisfied ("You can't have the climax of the narrative be the worst chapter in your book"). The easiest section for me to pull together was the discussion in chapter 8 on Moroni "Christianizing" Ether, which was based on a paper that Heather had already written and graciously pulled from publication at the last minute when I suggested that it would make a great addition to the book. In the end, very little of the first chapter written in Hawaii survived in the printed volume.

JBMS: *Can you say more about the scholarly roots of* Understanding*? What elements of your approach to the Book of Mormon are original? How much did the project draw on earlier studies?*

Hardy: Most previous LDS treatments of the Book of Mormon have been either devotional or apologetic. That is to say, they mainly paraphrase the text and focus on doctrinal points that are in harmony with current LDS teachings, or they attempt to defend the historicity of the book by countering common criticisms and identifying elements of the narrative that correspond to ancient phenomena that would have been unknown to Joseph Smith in 1829. (Terryl Givens's *By the Hand*

of Mormon was an important exception, but his work was primarily a reception history of the Book of Mormon rather than a study of the text itself.) Devotion and apologetics are important ways to read scripture within a faith community, and I tried to connect my work as much as possible to earlier Mormon scholarship in the endnotes—which offer a conversation for insiders that may not be of interest to every reader of *Understanding*—but I was primarily concerned with how the text actually operates: what are its constituent parts, how do they fit together, how does the book present itself, and how does it communicate its points? It was somewhat surprising how little even renowned LDS scholars such as B. H. Roberts and Hugh Nibley had to say on these topics. (I found more to work with in John W. Welch's writings.)

These are not terribly original questions, and I wondered why Latter-day Saints had not been asking them in critical, systematic, comprehensive ways before. Part of the reason, surely, is that the current official formatting masks the inherent structure of the text and facilitates superficial readings. The 1920 edition adopted a standard biblical format in an attempt to make the Book of Mormon look like scripture— like a book that deserved to be taken seriously. In the twenty-first century, however, that same format makes the book easy to dismiss because it is difficult to see beyond the archaic diction and inelegant style. So the *Reader's Editio*n was not particularly innovative; the formatting was essentially adapted from modern translations of the Bible. Yet highlighting the different components and genres within the narrative offers a richer reading experience. In a similar way, I think that more widespread acquaintance with mainstream biblical scholarship would help Mormons see more in their own scriptures. We don't have to reinvent the art of close reading. Rabbis and scholars have been doing it for centuries. Any number of standard textbooks introducing the Old and New Testaments would give Latter-day Saints new questions and new things to look for. I have particularly benefited from reading Alter and Sternberg, as mentioned above. Anyone willing to work through the footnotes to the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* or the *Jewish Study Bible* (also published by Oxford) will get a master class in careful scriptural

reading. Such books are readily available, and it's not difficult to get started. Soon you too could be spotting repetitions, patterns, inconsistencies, seams in narratives, intratextual connections, conspicuous absences, ideas that develop over time, and so forth. For instance, have you ever noticed that the Book of Mormon, unlike the Bible, has no examples of good men who go bad, though there are plenty of cases of the opposite? Whatever that might mean.

JBMS: *Can you point to some illustrative examples of your methodology in the book?*

Hardy: Generally, our practice was to notice as much as we could, and then assume intentionality. Someone, somewhere decided that the story should be told in just this fashion. When taking the Book of Mormon on its own terms, this line of questioning most often leads to the narrators, and in imagining them as rational moral agents, we tried to come up with scenarios that would make sense of what we had observed. Of course, it is also possible to try to explain the details of the text through the lens of Joseph Smith, imagining which aspects of his life and thought might have given rise to various Book of Mormon characters and incidents (as Dan Vogel does in his notable biography of Smith).[2] This will be the way that many people approach the text, which is perfectly legitimate, but it is important to recognize that Smith never speaks in his own voice in the Book of Mormon; everything is seen through the narrators and their complicated scheme of plates and records. If Smith was a competent novelist—a rather minimalist assessment of such a successful work—he created characters that can be understood in deeply human terms, with comprehensible perspectives, intentions, and emotions. This is particularly the case when the narrators explicitly address the motivations behind their writing and editing, their responses to the events they are describing, and the lessons they

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2. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

perceive for their future readers—all of which happens regularly in the Book of Mormon.

Some of what I draw attention to in *Understanding* might be seen as ambiguous. It is a subjective judgment as to how many shared elements two stories must have before we can conclude that they have been deliberately composed as parallel narratives meant to be read in tandem. And verbal repetitions may be interpreted as intentional allusions—as when the opening chapters of Ether employ language from 1 Nephi, or when Moroni's farewell echoes those of previous characters—or alternatively, they may be the result of Joseph Smith having a limited number of stock phrases at his disposal, whether as translator or author. Yet there are patterns that seem distinctive enough to warrant an explanation of some sort. For instance, the title "Holy One of Israel," which is closely associated with Isaiah in the Bible, appears thirty-eight times in the Book of Mormon, thirty-five of which are in Nephi's writings. From what we know of Nephi, he felt a strong affinity for Isaiah, but then again, one might argue the phrase caught Smith's attention in the last couple weeks of the dictation process (since 1 Nephi–Omni were apparently produced after Mosiah–Moroni), or that perhaps Smith imagined Nephi as a character with an affinity for Isaiah.

There are also, however, characteristic patterns that are objectively in the text. For instance, there are over ninety chronological markers in Alma and Helaman taking the general form of "in the X year of the reign of the judges," about a third of which are paired with "thus ended the X year of the reign of the judges." The chronology is consistent and clear, regardless of whether the notations of beginnings and endings are separated by a few verses, a few pages, or several chapters. That does not happen by accident. So also the chronicles of Jaredite kings in Ether 7–11 exactly line up with the twenty-seven names in the genealogy of Ether 1, in reverse order. There is more to the Book of Mormon than Joseph Smith simply putting his face in a hat and improvising tales of the Nephites, as some readers have assumed based on Lucy Mack Smith's famous description of the teenage Joseph regaling his family

with "amusing recitals" of the lifestyles of the ancient inhabitants of America.

Similarly, there is no question that five of the six letters quoted verbatim in Mormon's writings (Mosiah–Mormon 7) occur within a block of eight chapters at the end of Alma, or that Moroni has inserted six distinct editorial comment sections into the book of Ether and that nearly all the references to Christ appear within those sections. Nephi inserts phrases into his recital of Isaiah 48–49 that have application to his family situation; prophecies and their fulfillments are brought into alignment through shared phrasing and explicit commentary; complex geographical and temporal junctions in the narrative are handled smoothly; Alma's description of his conversion experience as related in Alma 36 shows a high degree of arrayed repetition; and Moroni attempts to conclude his record three times. These are elements of the text that invite interpretation and explanation. Joseph Smith may be a storyteller, but if so, he is a more sophisticated storyteller than many have supposed.

JBMS: *Some readers have criticized/praised your work as being covertly apologetic with regard to the Book of Mormon's miraculous production or ancient historicity. Since it is generally accepted that Smith dictated the Book of Mormon one time through, over a three-month period, the text's complexity and coherence could support the argument that he couldn't have done it without divine intervention. And when you explain the book's structure and interconnections, you look first to the book's narrators rather than to Smith, writing about Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as if they were real people. How do you situate your work within that conversation?*

Hardy: The historicity of the Book of Mormon, along with the reality of angels and gold plates, has always been a key issue in Mormonism. And it's not going away. Believers regard the Book of Mormon as a miraculous translation of an ancient record, while outsiders see it as religious fiction. This is a nearly insurmountable divide, but I think that both positions are reasonable and defensible (acknowledging that the vast

majority of people will find talk of ancient Nephites literally incredible). I am a believer myself, but there is no hidden agenda in *Understanding* to try to prove traditional LDS truth claims or to browbeat or belittle those who do not share our faith. Instead, I hope *Understanding* will facilitate productive conversation. Non-Mormons may be interested in what adherents might see in this odd, sometimes opaque new American scripture, while Latter-day Saints can benefit from outsiders' perspectives and insights. The trick is to keep both sides talking without the conversation devolving into accusations of fraud and gullibility on the one hand, or persecution and spiritual blindness on the other.

I settled on two tactics. The first was to put aside any direct discussions of historicity. In the preface to *Understanding*, I spoke of "bracketing" the issue, but in retrospect that word is not quite right. Obviously, one's opinion as to whether the Book of Mormon is an ancient text or a product of the nineteenth century will have great bearing on possible interpretations. So what I actually did was flip back and forth between the two perspectives. I identify some feature of the text that needs explanation and then I say: From a believer's point of view, it might look like this; but if taken as a work of fiction, this other hypothesis might make more sense. I tried to give space for both belief and disbelief, for example, by citing parallels with historians such as Thucydides and Sima Qian as well as novelists like Cervantes, Defoe, and Nabokov. In the end, readers can make their choice. The book is profoundly double minded, but I hope that's an advantage to certain types of discussions, particularly those in an academic context.

JBMS: *You don't give equal time to the two points of view.*

Hardy: No, I certainly lean toward Mormon perspectives. But *Understanding* was always intended as an insider's guide. If believers themselves can't give reasons why reading their scripture might be a worthwhile endeavor, why would outsiders even bother? Yet I tried to take my responsibility as a "host" seriously. You don't invite someone into your home and then spend the evening insisting that they are wrong

or obtuse or morally deficient. I invite readers to imagine how it might look to take the Book of Mormon on its own terms, but I'm happy in return to imagine how skeptical outsiders might make sense of the same data. If some of the literary patterns I point to may be problematic from a naturalistic point of view, there are other features of the text that are difficult for Latter-day Saints to account for—and I don't shy away from acknowledging them. Respect for a conversation partner requires fairness and honesty in dealing with the evidence. For instance, the presence of Second Isaiah in Nephi's writings is one of the greatest challenges to claims of historicity, and I point out that the lengthy quotations of Second Isaiah in 1 Nephi 20–21, borrowed from the King James Bible, can't simply be artifacts of the translation since they have been modified in ways that are integral to the narrative (although there are additional changes that don't seem to make much difference at all).

Similarly, when I discuss how Moroni's exposition on faith at Ether 12 makes allusions to phrases and events from throughout the Nephite record, I also explore how the structure of his argument is based on Hebrews 11. I'm not quite sure how to explain that from a faithful perspective—though I trust that satisfactory answers are possible—but the connection will make obvious sense to anyone who regards Smith as the author. I'm secure enough in my testimony that it doesn't threaten me to try to see things from a non-Mormon perspective, or even to attempt to help outsiders refine and sharpen their opinions about the Book of Mormon, without expecting that they will convert. There are many reasons to read the Book of Mormon aside from a desire to know whether or not it came from God. People interested in Joseph Smith, Mormonism, American history and literature, new religious movements, and world scripture can all benefit from close readings of the text, and outside scholars (most of whom see Joseph Smith as the author) have begun to analyze what the book says about theology, race, class, and gender. I think that's great, but in *Understanding* I wanted to encourage close reading in those conversations by arguing that if you're not seeing the narrators at every turn, you're not really reading the Book

of Mormon—because that's how the book is constructed, regardless of who the author(s) may have been.

JBMS: *You said that you had two strategies for keeping communication lines open between believers and outsiders. If the first was to put aside direct discussions of historicity, what was the second?*

Hardy: I tried to keep my attention pretty closely on the text itself.

JBMS: *So you don't talk much about Joseph Smith and his nineteenth-century environment, but you also don't have much to say about ancient Mesoamerica.*

Hardy: Right. Those discussions are important in arguments about historicity, but they are somewhat extraneous to literary readings of the text, which is what I tried to model (though because "the Book of Mormon as literature" sounds to some like a retreat from historicity, I prefer "narrative analysis," since narrative is something shared by both history and fiction). Too often in the past, readings of the Book of Mormon have simply been springboards to questions like "What could Joseph Smith have known?" and "Are these parallels more convincing than those parallels?" Apart from a few references to biblical narratives and language—which might have been available to both ancient Nephites and Joseph Smith—I wanted to focus on how the text functions as an independent, coherent entity. It helps that I chose narrative as the central organizing concept.

An introduction to the Book of Mormon that focused on its language—which is often awkward, ungrammatical, and filled with phrases from the King James Version of the Bible—would have put Joseph Smith front and center. So also a detailed investigation of Book of Mormon theology would have needed to address the many nineteenth-century religious concepts and concerns that are in the text. (Again, I believe there are faithful ways of dealing with these issues, but those discussions might be more appropriate in books for Latter-day Saints). One way the Book of Mormon is not like

the Bible is that the Mormon scripture is not particularly conducive to the historical-critical method, which will always be a one-sided affair. It is easy enough to look to nineteenth-century America for sources, influences, and parallels (especially in the age of Google Books), but once Lehi and his family leave the environs of Israel in 1 Nephi 19, the geography of the Book of Mormon is something of a mystery.

I believe that the events of the Book of Mormon happened some-where, and Mesoamerica seems the most likely candidate, but without any independent records of Nephite civilization, or other texts written in reformed Egyptian, or even New World artifacts that archaeolo-gists acknowledge as having their origins in the Ancient Near East, it is impossible to bring to bear the sort of comparative archaeological, historical, and philological resources that have galvanized biblical stud-ies in the last couple of centuries. Because the narrators of the Book of Mormon are so explicit about their writing and editing processes, one *can* bring to the table something like biblical source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and rhetorical criticism, but in the end it all takes place within the book's highly developed narrative structure, which is a real strength of the text.

Not that there is anything wrong with approaching other people's scriptures through their characteristic strengths. For instance, as an out-sider I enjoy introductions to the Qur'an that explain the details, mean-ing, and effects of its refined and elevated Arabic, or the philosophical depths of early Buddhist sutras, or the poetic genius of the Adi Granth. It's okay to read sacred texts on their own terms, but non-Mormons will need help navigating the coherent but somewhat convoluted narrative structure of the Book of Mormon, with its several hundred characters and places. It's not as readily appreciable as wisdom texts such as the Dhammapada or the Daodejing, which are replete with provocative aphorisms and universal truths. I don't feel like I am asking readers of *Understanding* to do anything I wouldn't do myself. Is it possible to acknowledge the strengths and richness of other people's scriptures without being drawn into winner-take-all debates over ultimate truth?

Sure. Is it worthwhile to try to understand how accepting such texts as authoritative might shape and enhance the lives of believers? Of course.

JBMS: *Considering your own background of teaching religious texts from many traditions in an academic environment, expand a little on why you think it's reasonable to expect non-Mormons to imagine the narrators—whom they assume are fictional characters—as thinking, feeling, historical individuals.*

Hardy: I think that it's possible, and even useful, for readers to enter into the world of the text, even if it's only on a temporary, provisional basis. It's a way to make sense of the story and to follow up on its implications. And I should note that even though historicity is of crucial importance to Mormons (and critics of Mormonism), it's not as big an issue to most academic readers. It would be odd for non-Mormons to think of the Book of Mormon as anything other than a product of nineteenth-century America, which allows them space to take the characters seriously and also focus on other matters.

The situation is similar to my teaching the Hindu epic *Ramayana* this semester. Like the Book of Mormon, it takes the form of a lengthy narrative with a narrator, Valmiki, who is also a character in the story (even though he is not as present throughout the text as Mormon). As non-Hindus, my students will try to understand why Valmiki tells the tale in a particular way. They will be asked to imagine the tender relationship of Rama and Sita, the emotions of Hanuman and Lakshmana, the moral principles at stake, and why characters choose some actions rather than others. They will be looking for clues as to why the *Ramayana* has been one of the most beloved and oft-told stories in India, and they will think about what it might be like to grow up with this story and even pattern one's life on it. A quick Internet search reveals that for some Hindus the historicity of Lord Rama is of overwhelming significance and that there are detailed discussions of dates, geography (including traces of a land bridge from India to Sri Lanka), archaeological evidence, remains of four-tusked elephants mentioned in

the epic, and so forth. It's easy to see why these types of discussions matter to believers, but they are not particularly relevant to the purposes of my class. (And don't even get me started on how much I enjoyed Peter Brook's six-hour film version of the Mahabharata, though I realize it has been controversial in India.)

JBMS: *How did your understanding of the Book of Mormon shift as you worked on the project? Are there things that you now wish you had done differently?*

Hardy: I used to think, as many Latter-day Saints do, that Joseph Smith translated by receiving spiritual impressions that he put into his own words, but it now seems more likely to me that the English Book of Mormon was revealed in a fairly exact form. (Royal Skousen's meticulous textual criticism has also moved me in this direction.) As I edited the *Reader's Edition* and wrote *Understanding*, I gained a greater appreciation for how carefully the text is constructed—the parts really do seem to fit together consistently and coherently! When details are included in a story, they are usually not extraneous but are connected to the larger context or to earlier incidents. Similarly, I once believed that the Book of Mormon might be usefully thought of as folk art—unpolished and aesthetically naïve, but impressive in its own way. While that assessment may work for superficial readings that focus on the quasi-biblical language, at a deeper structural level the book is an unacknowledged masterpiece of narrative technique that is beyond almost anything else in early American literature.

More specifically, it's a striking thing to observe how the narrators themselves develop and grow in understanding over the course of their work. Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni are all tragic figures, writing with a spiritual maturity that comes from difficult lives—they were each men of sorrows, acquainted with grief, so to speak—yet they nevertheless found the capacity to love their enemies, look to the future, and remain faithful. I think they are the wisest, most compelling voices in our religious tradition. And because the Book of Mormon was written specifically for

later generations, it's all about relationships; the narrators invite readers into a relationship with themselves, and then ultimately, with God. It seems like there is so much more that could be done with this text that I believe is both sacred and a gift. I wish that I had had more space in the book to devote to Jacob and to Alma the Younger. And I would like to have taken on some larger themes and more extended readings, since most of the exegesis in *Understanding* focused on short passages.

I do have one particular regret. About the time the book went to press, I remembered that there is a historical precedent for my hypothesis (borrowed from Heather) of Moroni Christianizing the book of Ether. So if there had been one more round of revisions, I would have added this parenthetical comment to page 236, right after footnote 23:

> (It is similar to how the Greek translators of the Septuagint inserted over fifty references to God—mostly within six added sections—into the book of Esther, which previously had none.)

JBMS: *What kind of academic projects do you hope* Understanding *and the* Reader's Edition *might foster in the future?*

Hardy: I hope that it leads to more accurate, more insightful conversations about the Book of Mormon both among Latter-day Saints and also with outsiders. Even from a secular perspective, the Book of Mormon offers an intriguing example of a new, canonical scripture. This text is one of the strengths and defining elements of our faith tradition. It seems to me that Mormons might have a great deal to contribute to the field of religious studies if we were better prepared to be part of those discussions. We also have a lot to learn from the ways in which scholars and religious communities have interpreted and understood other sacred texts.

There is still much that could be done with the language and theology of the Book of Mormon, and recently I have become interested in the possibilities of canonical criticism. What does it mean to read a text as scripture? Or for a community to value its moral authority over its literary authority? Without ignoring the importance of historical and

devotional readings, we could ask about other ways of deriving spiritual sustenance and intellectual insight from sacred texts. How can scripture create alternative worlds that challenge the prevailing culture? What are the implications of finding the meaning of one's life within a book? The Book of Mormon has too often been treated as an *object* by defenders, detractors, and academics alike; what would it look like to approach it as a *subject* in the sort of "I-Thou" relationship described by Martin Buber so long ago?[3]

JBMS: *In the end, do you consider yourself an apologist?*

Hardy: Not in the narrow sense of trying to prove that the Book of Mormon is from God. Such debates don't really figure into academic discourse. But I am certainly an apologist in the sense that I am arguing that the Book of Mormon is worth reading carefully, and that it's a work of scripture that Mormons can be proud of. These ideas are integral to my personal religious commitment, but they are also, I hope, positions that can be shared by people of different faiths, or no faith at all. Although the Book of Mormon can be a difficult and even tedious slog for outsiders—particularly in the official edition—it is demonstrably not nonsense that can be easily dismissed. In fact, as I say in the afterword to *Understanding*, "it's much better than it sounds," even if believers themselves have been slow to recognize its remarkable, distinctive strengths.

JBMS: *Finally, do you have any favorite insights from* Understanding *that you think people have been missing?*

Hardy: There's a footnote on page 280 that offers a nice example of how reading in other religious traditions can enrich our understanding of our own scripture:

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3. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937); see also Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

> "It is written: 'And it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus.' R. Levi, according to others R. Jonathan, said: This is a tradition among us from our ancestors—the men of the Great Assembly— that wherever it is written וַיְהִי [*wayĕhî*, it came to pass], was some disaster." Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah, ch. 1.

The rabbis of the Talmud were marvelous readers of scripture, and the observation that the phrase "it came to pass" is usually followed by disaster fits the Book of Mormon to a T.

This interview was conducted by Blair Hodges, public communications specialist at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, January 2016.

Grant Hardy (PhD, Yale University) is professor of history and religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. He has authored *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian's Conquest of History*; *The Establishment of the Han Empire and Imperial China*; and *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*. He has also edited *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* and coedited the *Oxford History of Historical Writing, Vol. 1*. Hardy's "Sacred Texts of the World," a 36-lecture course for the Teaching Company, was released in 2014 and followed his earlier course, "Great Minds of the Eastern Intellectual Tradition."