Journal of The Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture Volume 25

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Editors’ Introduction

In this issue of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, we are looking at two significant milestones in Book of Mormon studies. First, we celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Journal with a retrospective that reviews past and present editorships, noting unique areas of focus each editor has brought to the Journal. This retrospective also reviews the changes in naming, formatting, and style that the Journal has gone through and highlights specific noteworthy issues that have appeared through the years. Finally, all the editors up to the present offer their perspective on their tenure as editors and their reflections on the importance of the Journal.

While examining the history of the Journal is instructive, fruitful, and inspiring, we thought it might be worthwhile to look ahead to the future of the Journal and, more generally, the field of Book of Mormon studies. In doing so we imagine various ways to build on the foundational scholarship of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and, at the same time, to stimulate new approaches to Book of Mormon studies that can help position the Book of Mormon in the larger academy. To this end, we have also provided in this issue a prospective as well as a retrospective, laying out what we hope to see happen during the next twenty-five years (and more) of Book of Mormon studies.

The second milestone we celebrate in this issue of the Journal is the seminal work of Grant Hardy. It has now been thirteen years since
the appearance of Hardy’s *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (University of Illinois Press, 2003) and six years since the publication of his *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2010). In many ways, Hardy’s work has marked the possibility of a turning point in Book of Mormon studies, with the Book of Mormon being brought to the attention of the broader academy. We as editors see his work as transitional in a crucial way, and as we mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Journal*, we allow Hardy’s work to help us take a look at both what has been done and what yet remains to be done.

Consequently, following our retrospective and prospective, we provide a series of contributions focused on Hardy’s work. We begin with an interview, conducted by Blair Hodges, giving Hardy an opportunity to discuss his interest in the Book of Mormon and why and how he produced his significant books. Following the publication of Hardy’s books, we have seen a host of other books and articles citing his books. With all this well-deserved attention, we as editors wondered if we might sponsor a conversation about how his work has affected the course of Book of Mormon studies. We invited six scholars from LDS and non-LDS vantage points to review and engage with Hardy’s work—we asked them to assess specifically the strengths and weaknesses of *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, to identify areas where we still need to do more work, and to begin to build upon his work. We conclude the issue with Hardy’s response to the several discussants, helping to cast the entire exchange as a give-and-take conversation.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Janiece Johnson, our book review editor, for all her hard work in bringing this issue together. We also deeply appreciate the assiduous care with which Shirley Ricks prepared the *Journal* for publication.

We hope this issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* will encourage more interest and excitement in continuing to explore the richness of the Book of Mormon. Let the next twenty-five years be even more productive for the Book of Mormon than the last twenty-five!
A Journal of Book of Mormon Studies
Retrospective: Twenty-Five Years of Scholarship


In 1992, when Stephen D. Ricks proposed a new academic journal focusing on the Book of Mormon, his goal was to encourage serious research on the Book of Mormon and publish that research for the widest possible audience. Through the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), Ricks, along with John W. Welch, Daniel C. Peterson, and others, had already been participating for years in publishing a newsletter, research updates, and important books, including John Sorenson's seminal An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon and the first volumes of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley. The new journal, however, would be something different—in Ricks’s words, “a forum devoted to the serious and faithful study of the Book of Mormon in its historical, linguistic, cultural, and theological context.”

The first volume of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies delivered on the vision Ricks had for the new publication. Eleven scholars contributed articles on a wide range of topics—including geography, economics, customs, cultures, laws and legal systems, and language studies. Subsequent issues of the Journal followed the same pattern: Faithful scholars from diverse disciplines used their expertise to contribute to the academic study of the Book of Mormon. During Ricks’s six-year tenure as editor,
more than 140 articles were published in the *Journal*—an unprecedented amount of diverse scholarship on the Book of Mormon.

In 1998, John L. Sorenson succeeded Ricks as the editor of the *Journal*. While Sorenson wished to continue the tradition of excellent scholarship, he felt that the *Journal* had potential to reach a far wider audience. He proposed a change in the *Journal’s* format, from the traditional 6” × 9”, unillustrated format to a larger, illustrated presentation that would appeal to an expanded readership. In Sorenson’s words, “the plan was to seek competent Book of Mormon scholars willing to present first-rate scholarship in accessible language and in a visually attractive format.” In addition to attracting a larger audience, Sorenson also desired a larger, more diverse pool of contributors. He worked tirelessly to encourage scholars from many parts of the world to write articles for the *Journal*. During his time as editor, more than fifty different scholars contributed articles; many of these scholars were not affiliated with BYU. Sorenson also introduced a feature entitled “Out of the Dust,” which highlighted new discoveries with relevance to the Book of Mormon.

In 2002, after four years as editor, Sorenson passed the editorship of the *Journal* to S. Kent Brown, who had served as associate editor under Sorenson. Brown built on Sorenson’s expanded vision for the *Journal*. As part of his own efforts to broaden the range of the articles in the *Journal*, Brown invited a number of diverse scholars to serve on the board of associate editors or on the editorial advisory board. Brown wrote, “In time, the *Journal* enjoyed the supporting commitment of an international group of historians and linguists and anthropologists and literary savants who served on one or the other board.” Also during Brown’s tenure, the focus of the *Journal* expanded to include articles on early LDS Church history (especially regarding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon), translations of the Book of Mormon into other languages, and early missionary work. Additionally, it included for the first time a recurring feature that spotlighted individual conversion stories.

After Brown’s six years as its editor, the *Journal* had become the premier publication of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, which was organized in 2006 to include FARMS and other departments.
Brown’s retirement and Andrew H. Hedges’s appointment as the new editor allowed the Maxwell Institute to reevaluate the mission and scope of the *Journal*. Topics covered in its pages ranged widely beginning from the first issue, but developments over the years had broadened the scope to include topics related to LDS scripture and history that did not necessarily touch on the Book of Mormon. Hedges proposed a formal expansion of the *Journal*, with a name change (to *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture*), to include all restoration scripture—Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price—as well as other material from church history (such as the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible and material from the ongoing Joseph Smith Papers Project). Unfortunately for the *Journal*, Hedges received an assignment to work on the Joseph Smith Papers Project, which cut short his tenure as editor after only one year. He nonetheless oversaw the transformation of the scope of the *Journal*.

In 2009, Paul Y. Hoskisson became the editor of the *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* and continued the tradition of encouraging scholarship on the Book of Mormon from a variety of backgrounds. Hoping to reintroduce significant but often overlooked articles to *Journal* readers, he initiated a repeating feature, “Worthy of Another Look: Classics from the Past.” In particular, he showcased several articles from Hugh Nibley, including a richly illustrated version of “The Early Christian Prayer Circle” (2010). Hoskisson also encouraged young LDS artists, commissioning original artwork from Emily Gordon, Annie Henrie, and Elspeth Young. As editor, Hoskisson, with his patient attention to detail, approved illustrations that were both relevant and accurate.

Upon Hoskisson’s retirement from Brigham Young University in 2014, Brian M. Hauglid assumed the editorship of the *Journal*. With an eye to increased interest in the Book of Mormon from the larger non-Mormon academy, Hauglid and his associate editors not only restored the *Journal’s* original name—*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*—and focus, but have made a concerted effort to include more non–Latter-day Saint scholars as contributors, reviewers, and editorial
board members and to ensure that the Journal plays a role in the larger world of Mormon studies, which is rapidly becoming an established (if nonetheless still formative) feature of the academic world. Further, partly in response to the reformulation of the FARMS Review as the Mormon Studies Review, Hauglid has introduced a book review section to the Journal for the first time and has appointed an associate editor in charge of reviews. The Journal, in addition to publishing full-length articles, has now reintroduced shorter notes (similar to those found in the earliest issues) that are meant to outline possibilities for further research rather than to make a definitive contribution. Hauglid and his editorial team look forward to the future of Book of Mormon studies with great optimism.

The design and format of the Journal over the years have been enhanced by the talents of Michael P. Lyon, art consultant; P. Brandon Jameson, Brigham Young University Publications and Graphics; Bjorn W. Pendleton; Stephen Hales Creative, Inc.; and Andrew Heiss. Production editors have included Don L. Brugger, Alison V. P. Coutts, Jacob D. Rawlins, and Shirley S. Ricks.

Significant Issues

While each issue of the Journal has had significant articles that have furthered scholarship on the Book of Mormon, certain issues stand out as milestones in the Journal's history.

Issue 1/1 (1992). The first issue of the Journal represents a landmark in publications on the Book of Mormon. Not only was it the beginning of a new wave of LDS scholarship, but it also contained some of the most significant articles published on the Book of Mormon, which stand up to scrutiny even twenty-five years later.

Issue 4/1 (1995). In 1995, the editors of the Journal paid tribute to the late Sidney B. Sperry, who, along with Hugh Nibley and John Sorenson, pioneered the systematic study of the Book of
Mormon. This issue contained tributes, memorials, a bibliography, and twenty-five of Sperry’s articles on the Book of Mormon.

**Issue 7/1 (1998).** When John Sorenson took over the editorship of the *Journal*, he initiated a change to a larger format, complete with extensive color illustrations, including both photographs and fine artwork. Sorenson did not, however, abandon the academic rigor applied to earlier issues of the *Journal*. This first issue in the new format introduced a discussion on Lehi’s trail and the location of Nephi’s Bountiful that has continued in the pages of the *Journal*.

**Issue 9/2 (2000).** In a short article near the back of *JBMS* 9/2, John Sorenson addressed the difficulty of using DNA to establish any sort of link between modern native Americans and the peoples of the Book of Mormon—years before opponents of the Book of Mormon attempted to apply DNA evidence to Book of Mormon claims. Sorenson’s work was later expanded and supported by geneticists and DNA scientists in *JBMS* 12/1.

**Issue 13/1–2 (2004).** One of several themed issues produced during Kent Brown’s editorship, this issue focused on the Hill Cumorah, including articles on its location, history, traditions, and the Hill Cumorah Pageant.

**Issue 15/2 (2006).** In another themed issue, Kent Brown presented the views of various scholars on Lehi’s trail from Jerusalem to the land Bountiful, where they launched the ship that would take them to the promised land.

**Issue 17/1–2 (2008).** Under its new editor, Andrew Hedges, the *Journal* once again underwent a transformation—in title, scope, and design. This new beginning for the *Journal* represented an expansion of the original vision set forth by Stephen Ricks.

**Issue 22/2 (2013).** The final issue prepared by Paul Hoskisson encapsulated his vision as editor by showcasing the ambitious contributions of young talent—both artistic and scholarly—and
seamlessly weaving them together with the work of seasoned professionals. This richly illustrated issue also served as an elegant capstone to the format changes initiated by John Sorenson during his tenure as editor.

**Issue 23 (2014).** Under a new team of editors led by Brian Hauglid, the *Journal* reverted to its original title and black-and-white, 6” × 9” format. It now features full-length essays, review essays, and notes based on faithful, serious research directed to both believers and nonbelievers.

**Editors' Perspectives**

The following statements were written at different times by the *Journal* editors.

*Stephen D. Ricks*

The *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* originated in discussions among John W. Welch, Daniel C. Peterson, and myself in 1992. We decided to found the *Journal* as a forum devoted to the serious and faithful study of the Book of Mormon in its historical, linguistic, cultural, and theological context. It took next to no time coming up with the title of the journal, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, and it has, I am happy to say, stuck through many years.

We brought our proposal to the board of directors of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, who approved it, along with our board of editors, which included Kay P. Edwards, Robert L. Millet, Donald W. Parry, and David R. Seely (we later added Brian Hauglid and Gaye Strathearn).

Intending to be “no respecter of persons” in our selection of papers to be included in forthcoming issues, we did not insist that those publishing in the *Journal* have certain academic credentials. We did,
however, ask that the work be rigorous, carefully thought out, and well presented. At first we advertised for submissions—even soliciting some papers—but since the significance of a journal devoted to this particular subject caught on, it has taken on a life of its own.

While I enjoyed all the articles published during my tenure as editor, I am most pleased that the Journal became a forum for investigations of proper names and their origins in the Book of Mormon (a topic I hope to turn into a book-length study). Through the years, the Journal has continued the vision we first presented to the FARMS Board in 1992. I hope to see that work continue for many more years to come.

John L. Sorenson

When Stephen Ricks and others launched the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies in the fall of 1992, I enthusiastically supported the idea and the effort by contributing a significant piece (“When Lehi’s Party Arrived, Did They Find Others in the Land?”) that appeared as the first article in volume 1, number 1.

I was still an enthusiast upon learning in 1997 that a follow-on editor was being sought. Feeling that the publication had not yet reached its potential, I presented a proposal to the officers of FARMS to serve as the new editor, under certain conditions. First, I would require the aid of two mature associate editors, S. Kent Brown and M. Gerald Bradford. The second condition was that the format of the Journal be substantially changed in order to attract an expanded readership. Taking Scientific American as a general model, the plan was to seek competent Book of Mormon scholars willing to present first-rate scholarship in accessible language and in a visually attractive format.

Acceptance of the proposal implied that substantially more FARMS resources would be directed toward preparing the Journal. In fact, it became the flagship publication of the Foundation that would go to all member/subscribers twice per year.
Secondary concerns at that stage were to invite a widened range of writers to contribute and to assist them to prepare their articles at an appropriate level of clarity and rigor. The visual quality of the Journal depended on the talent of excellent designers, particularly Bjorn Pendleton. In some cases specific works of art began to be commissioned for use in the Journal.

An additional goal was to increase the variety of contributors. In three and one-half years the work of 35 different authors was published, half of them located at places other than BYU.

Those who have invested effort in the Journal can look forward to progress in future publishing of not only articles on the Book of Mormon, but also now on a wider range of scholarship on the other restoration scriptures.

S. Kent Brown

How do I characterize my editorial years with the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies? I was introduced to this world through John L. Sorenson, who succeeded the first editor, Stephen D. Ricks. Dr. Sorenson graciously invited me to be one of his associate editors in 1997. I was thrilled to be able to work with someone of Dr. Sorenson's abilities and interests. When he stepped aside after four years, I accepted the invitation from FARMS to succeed him. I felt that I could do no better than to hold the Journal in the channel that he had carved.

My interests largely mirrored those of my two predecessors—to broaden the range of topics covered by the Journal (that is, to explore both the ancient dimensions of the text and the modern story of the Book of Mormon) and to stretch the pool of contributors. In this light, my first task was to invite not only a diverse group to serve on the board of associate editors, but also an equally diverse group to act as an editorial advisory board. In time, the Journal enjoyed the supporting commitment of an international group of historians and linguists and
anthropologists and literary savants who served on one or the other board. For me, it was a very satisfying moment when the last person on my list said yes.

In retrospect, what would I judge to be the most significant issue of the Journal? Perhaps I could measure by the fact that we completely ran out of one issue, the one that dealt in large measure with the question of DNA and Native American origins (JBMS 12/1). I do not take credit for inaugurating the issue of the Journal that dealt with this question. The suggestion came from John Sorenson, who correctly anticipated that the question of DNA and its ability, or inability, to solve questions that tie to Book of Mormon origins would become important.

Naturally, the whole effort to put together issues of the Journal was filled with little disappointments and joyful triumphs. With this said, the biggest payoff for me was the deepened relationships with people who made efforts to submit studies or contributed their time to the editorial process by reviewing studies in the early stages. I am forever in their debt.

Andrew Hedges

The Journal of Book of Mormon Studies was first published in 1992, under the editorial direction of Stephen D. Ricks. In the seventh year, John L. Sorenson, as the Journal’s new editor, changed its format to make the contents more accessible to specialist and nonspecialist readers alike. Under the direction of Sorenson’s successor, S. Kent Brown, the Journal has continued to feature first-rate scholarship on the Book of Mormon, often accompanied by beautiful visual aids and images. Thanks to these scholars’ vision and editorial skills, thousands of people now enjoy the Journal either as subscribers or through the Internet, where they are able to stay abreast of the best that scholarship has to offer on the Book of Mormon.

Partly as a result of the Journal’s success, and partly in answer to the apparent need for a scholarly, faithful venue in which other latter-day
scriptures could regularly be discussed, with volume 17, the Journal’s scope was expanded to include all of what might be termed “Restoration Scripture”—those books of Latter-day Saint scripture and related texts that were revealed through the ministry of the Prophet Joseph Smith. These include the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. With the expansion in scope came a name change, to the Journal of the Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture—“the Book of Mormon” being retained in the title not only to help provide a sense of continuity with the former title but also in recognition of that book’s continuing role as the keystone of the Mormon faith.

Our hope is that the Journal will continue to be a venue where scholars from a variety of backgrounds can explore, discuss, and even debate important topics relating to the texts, contexts, and meaning of latter-day scripture. We believe that part of this includes reexamining and unpacking familiar assumptions and arguments—even those that have found their best expression in past issues of the Journal and related publications. We believe, too, that there are many topics yet to be explored in both the Book of Mormon and other restoration scriptures and hope contributors and readers alike will consider the Journal a fitting venue for introducing new subjects and directions for study.

Paul Y. Hoskisson

It is always easier to build on the great work of previous editors. I thanked them many times in my mind for leaving me a thriving and superior journal. It was hard to follow such competent scholars, and therefore I made no effort to make substantial changes. While maintaining faithful approaches to the scriptures of the restoration, as my predecessors had done, I did make it a policy to publish fresh voices in the field who came with new, sometimes quite unique perspectives.
In the few short years that I was editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies and Other Restoration Scripture, I also tried to showcase young, new Latter-day Saint artists and illustrators with their never-before-published work. In addition, I introduced a new section to the journal devoted to the republishing of classic LDS scholarly writing, especially of articles that may not have been so well known or that had made a significant contribution to the field.

Brian M. Hauglid

Over the past twenty-five years, the Journal has gone through changes in name, focus, format, and style. But through all these iterations the editors have consistently tried to retain its foundational mission to be “a forum devoted to the serious and faithful study of the Book of Mormon in its historical, linguistic, cultural, and theological context.”

At the outset of my editorship (2014), in consultation with the executive director, M. Gerald Bradford, and many others, it was determined that the Journal name would revert to the original Journal of Book of Mormon Studies. This change occurred primarily to underscore the unique place the Book of Mormon holds as sacred scripture within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We also wanted to highlight this by going back to the original vision of Stephen Ricks to dedicate a journal solely to the study of the Book of Mormon.

With my associate editors Mark Alan Wright and Joseph M. Spencer, we thought it necessary to build on the vision of Ricks to produce faithful, serious scholarship and to go one step further to subject future contributions to the Journal to the highest standards of both LDS and non-LDS peer review to attain the highest levels of academic quality. In doing this we realize that the reach of the Journal may be smaller than what John Sorenson envisioned. But we believe Book of Mormon studies stands on the precipice of acceptance within the larger academic community, especially as it reaches out to non-LDS scholars. We see this beginning to happen with non-LDS scholarship from respected scholars.
such as Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Paul Gutjahr, and John Christopher Thomas, who have produced serious Book of Mormon research for the academy.

All three periodicals of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship (Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, Studies in the Bible and Antiquity, and Mormon Studies Review) have now been standardized as annual journals of similar size and format. In addition, the three journals each have both LDS and non-LDS scholars serving on their editorial boards.

As editors of the Journal, we are committed to producing high-quality articles from a variety of scholars who, we believe, will faithfully and seriously bring Book of Mormon studies to a respectable place for Latter-day Saint scholarship and the academy at large.
A Book of Mormon Studies Prospective

Brian M. Hauglid, Mark Alan Wright, Joseph M. Spencer, and Janiece Johns

Twenty-five years before Stephen Ricks, the founding editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, set about publishing his first issue, Hugh Nibley sent to the printers the last of his great books on the Book of Mormon: Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World. Both the title and the subtitle of the book were meant to serve as provocations. The title asks readers to assess what has happened since the gold plates were first unearthed from their burial place, translated by the prophet Joseph Smith, and then made available to the world. Or, as Nibley makes clear in his preface to the volume, the title asks readers to consider what has not happened since the Book of Mormon first made its appearance to the English reader. “Instead of the vigorous onslaught that the Book of Mormon hypothesis invites and deserves,” he wrote, “it has elicited only a long monotonous drizzle of authoritarian denunciation, the off-hand opinions of impatient scholars whose intelligence and whose official standing will not allow them to waste a moment more than is necessary to write off an imposture so obviously deserving of contempt.”

In 1967, then, Nibley clearly lamented that he could find few members of the academy who thought the Book of Mormon worthy of a closer look. Yet Nibley believed that the Book of

Mormon deserved a place “in the modern world,” as his subtitle makes clear. The book was, by its own account, written by ancient prophets who saw the record’s primary purpose as, quite precisely, to transform the modern world. Indeed, the Book of Mormon bears a pointed message explicitly tailored to those who are the most uncomfortable with the implications of its truth claims.

Next year, in 2017, a half a century will have passed since Nibley’s *Since Cumorah* first appeared in print. And it has become more and more apparent that something has changed in the academy, most visibly in the past fifteen or so years. It certainly must be said that what Nibley calls “the Book of Mormon hypothesis”—that is, the claim that “the Book of Mormon contains genuine history,” along with its corollary that “the work was divinely inspired”—continues to be largely ignored by scholars who do not accept the book’s truth on faith. But there has nonetheless begun to appear in the larger academy a growing interest in understanding the textual complexities that give force to the Book of Mormon. Many previous scholars, both LDS and non-LDS, have spurred on this more general conversation and have worked to bring the Book of Mormon to the academy. Already in the 1970s Truman Madsen invited major non-LDS scholars to offer reflections on the Book of Mormon in significant conferences and symposia; the resulting publications continued to stimulate new work on the relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Bible. During the same years, Robert Matthews opened a friendly correspondence with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ), which laid the groundwork for subsequent study of the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. In the 1980s and 1990s, various scholars, most of them associated with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and many in connection with the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* itself, continued serious study of the Book of Mormon. Scholars like John Welch and Dan Peterson thus helped to build other bridges and to start other conversations that have continued into the

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present. All this hard work has begun in recent years to culminate in a wider reception for the Book of Mormon in the academy.

The Book of Mormon certainly still awaits the appropriate “vigorous onslaught” Nibley hoped for, but it can no longer be said that it receives “only a long monotonous drizzle of authoritarian denunciation.” Twenty-five years after the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* was published, scholarly conversations about the Book of Mormon among Latter-day Saint and non–Latter-day Saint academics of various disciplines have become an established—if nonetheless still minor—part of the academy. The Book of Mormon is now beginning to find a general academic audience willing to reconsider what it has to say to the modern world.

The publication of the twenty-fifth volume of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* has given us, as an editorial team, reason not only to reflect on what has happened in the fifty years since Nibley published *Since Cumorah*, including what has happened in the twenty-five years since the *Journal* began to circulate, but it has also caused us to reflect on the kinds of scholarly works that might be productively pursued over the next twenty-five or fifty years, especially given the more open climate to Book of Mormon studies. In this “prospective,” coupled with the “retrospective” that precedes it, we wish to outline a few things we believe could greatly benefit the field of Book of Mormon studies over the next twenty-five to fifty years. We pretend to nothing more than human insight. But we see a few specific needs that if addressed would help to promote a more robust and deeper study of the Book of Mormon. We also hope to call for more collaborative efforts to productively study the Book of Mormon, the kind of collaboration that will foster a real interest in work on the Book of Mormon within the larger academy. Where the trend has been toward individual projects and occasional research, we hope to spur longer-term joint efforts and collaborative research that opens up more avenues of study and lays a foundation for the best possible work on the Book of Mormon going forward.

We invite interested scholars, whatever their convictions, to contribute by producing excellent work on the Book of Mormon.
Taking stock of past work

The past several decades—the 1990s especially—were intensely productive for academic study of the Book of Mormon. John Welch has recently headed up an important service to students of the Book of Mormon in creating a website (called the Book of Mormon Central and located at bookofmormoncentral.org) where much of the past scholarly work on the Book of Mormon is being gathered into one place. With all that has been produced on the Book of Mormon, there still remains an urgent need to carefully sift through past scholarship to decide what should be part of the future of Book of Mormon studies.

Unfortunately, uneven and disparate scholarly work, combined with a general lack of consensus on what is most central to Book of Mormon studies, has inhibited finding some of the best recent work on the Book of Mormon. Many readers of the Book of Mormon have too often been disappointed when trying to locate what has been written on their particular topics of interest. Such scholars need to have available to them helpful resources that will quickly guide them to materials they absolutely must have on whatever subject they wish to address. To accomplish this task it is imperative to begin taking stock, preferably through collaborative efforts, to determine what precisely has been done on the Book of Mormon. Important questions might include: What articles and essays have appeared outside the mainstream of Mormon studies that may have important or productive things to say about the Book of Mormon? What should we consider to be the most important articles published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies? And why? What articles appearing in BYU Studies, the Interpreter, the Religious Educator, the Journal of Mormon History, Dialogue, and other journals dealing with the Book of Mormon should receive much more regular and sustained attention than they are currently receiving? What book chapters from various publications deserve to be remembered and built upon? And, of course, which scholarly books written on the Book of Mormon should be known about and read by anyone interested in pursuing serious academic study of the book?
Perhaps there has been too much reinventing the wheel in Book of Mormon studies. But how will we ever know unless we sense the urgency to make a serious collaborative effort to draw together the best available work and make its importance known to any and all students and scholars of the Book of Mormon? Certainly critical reflection of this kind would have profound and meaningful effects on the future direction of Book of Mormon studies.

Sponsoring new work

For the most part, work on the Book of Mormon has been driven by a relatively small set of questions and undertaken by scholars working within a relatively small set of disciplines. Thanks to the towering influence of Hugh Nibley, the vast majority of writings on the Book of Mormon have been written with the purpose of defending the historicity of the book. This is true of writings coming from scholars with training or interests either in ancient studies or in nineteenth-century history. Unfortunately, the production of such work has slowed considerably over the past decade. Yet the good news is that this slowing has opened the door for asking a wider range of questions. Ideally, of course, it would be far better if historical-critical work on the Book of Mormon proceeded apace with scholars working in other disciplines as well. Indeed, the field of Book of Mormon studies has ample room to encourage great work on the Book of Mormon from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, including the so-called “traditional” work.

In our view, a few disciplines and perspectives might be especially useful to Book of Mormon studies over the next few decades. For instance, even though there have been occasional literary studies of the Book of Mormon, we think that much more could still be done. Recently, major literary studies of the Book of Mormon have revealed how little we know about this approach and how much it could yet yield. While little has been done comparing the Book of Mormon text in deep and probing ways with texts from other world scripture, we think it promises to be quite a fruitful field of study. This kind of research
would have the additional benefit of placing the Book of Mormon in conversation with other scriptural traditions, which in turn would help draw the attention of a great many more scholars to the depth and richness of the book. Comparative studies of the Book of Mormon could also include investigating its complicated relationship with the Bible. Further, although founding editor Stephen Ricks called for serious theological study of the Book of Mormon, such a trend has only begun to emerge recently and has already revealed its fruitfulness. More and better-trained theologians could be working to produce close readings of the Book of Mormon and show how it might speak to persistently important questions central to philosophy and theology. Work on the critical text of the Book of Mormon has been going on for many years, primarily by one person, Royal Skousen. Other interested and qualified scholars need to seriously build on Skousen’s stellar work.

Handbooks and commentaries

Producing handbooks and commentaries could be another helpful way to sift through the massive work that has already been done on the Book of Mormon and, additionally, such works could stimulate the kind of study that still needs to be done. From time to time commentaries of various sorts emerge on the Book of Mormon, but very few of them draw on the available literature, and none of them seem to make note of textual passages that require further study. It would be especially useful to have a summary commentary on the Book of Mormon that brings together the best work of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, clearly pointing out along the way the major lacunae in the research. Also, a relatively simple exegetical commentary on the Book of Mormon, perhaps along the lines of a popular Bible study edition, would give both students and interested non-Mormons a place to start.

In a similar vein, we need to explore the possibility of producing handbooks on various parts or aspects of the Book of Mormon. Volumes modeled on the Oxford Shakespeare series or Norton’s critical editions might be issued on individual books in the Book of Mormon,
providing a solid introduction, a critical apparatus, an appendix that anthologizes particularly important secondary literature, and a selective bibliography. There could be short handbooks addressing specific aspects of the Book of Mormon—geography, for instance, or establishing the critical text—in imitation of the “Guides to Biblical Scholarship” published by Fortress Press. These could help scholars and laypersons develop a quick sense for the state of a given subfield that interests them. Handbooks such as these might especially help to spur more interesting and productive work on the Book of Mormon.

Obviously, these suggestions represent only a few of the directions Book of Mormon studies could go, and these should be pursued alongside rather than in the place of the sort of work that has been done in the past. There are undoubtedly many more ways to take stock of the great work that has been done on the Book of Mormon, as well as to help promote further work on the book. These, however, are a few ideas we see that could be particularly fruitful possibilities.

Scholars interested in contributing in some way to furthering Book of Mormon scholarship should feel free—if not obligated—to contact the editors of the Journal.
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

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 Edition 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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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 somewhere, 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 archaeologists 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 studies 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 outsider I enjoy introductions to the Qur’an that explain the details, meaning, 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 mat-
ter 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 Mor-
mon 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 apprecia-
tion 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 assess-
ment 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 faith-
ful. 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:

“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 [wayĕhi, 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._

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Understanding the Book of Mormon

Elizabeth Fenton

I received my first copy of the Book of Mormon on Halloween in 1999. I don’t usually remember acquiring books, but the circumstances surrounding this particular acquisition were embarrassing enough to leave an impression. It was my senior year of college, and I was hanging out in my apartment, half-watching a horror movie while completing some minor class assignment (I realize that this speaks volumes about my social life at the time). When the doorbell rang, I responded as I had been all evening—by greeting guests with a bowl of fun-sized Snickers. Across the threshold stood two well-dressed women sporting name tags. I thrust the candy at them and asked, “Are you guys dressed as Mormons?” As soon as the words passed my lips, the air between us shifted. We all froze, the question and the bowl hovering in the doorway between us. The answer, I realized with a certain, dawning mortification, was both yes and no. I fumbled to apologize: “Uhm . . . I mean . . . I’m sorry . . . I thought . . . I mean, it is Halloween . . . Would you like some candy?” I was making it worse. They knew it; I knew it. Salvaging the interaction could not be left to me. All of this transpired in about ten seconds, but I experienced it, and it remains in my memory, in cinematic slow motion, the moment stretching out and up as our smiles grew wider and more awkward. I felt like I was failing a politeness pop quiz, because, in fact, I was. But then those women gave me a gift: they laughed. “I guess we aren’t what you were expecting,” one said. Time
resumed its normal pace, and now I could laugh, too. We spoke for a few minutes, and despite my assertion that I was not interested in adopting a new religion, they left me with the book. They also declined my renewed and even more enthusiastic offers of candy, which I thought was unfortunate. I put the book away and didn’t think about it much for the next decade.

This essay is about crossing a threshold to meet the Book of Mormon. It’s a threshold I could not even approach as a harried undergraduate. And though I have read the book several times in the past few years, I still am feeling my way along that threshold’s edge. This is partly because the Book of Mormon is like any other complex text: its sprawling narrative, deep intertextuality, and at times dizzying rhetorical flourishes make it the sort of book one can read again and again, always seeing something new. Add to this its compelling history, and it becomes an artifact that a lifetime of study might never fully explain. But it would be disingenuous to pretend that the sole source of my readerly unease is the Book of Mormon itself. It is, simply and frankly, a challenge to write about someone else’s sacred text. I was raised Catholic in an interfaith household in rural Vermont, a state with a Congregational church on every corner that doesn’t have a Baptist church. When I received my copy of the Book of Mormon, my frame of reference for it was the series of LDS public service announcements that ran on television in the 1980s. After watching one—“Share a little bit of yourself, without even knowing!”—I asked my mother who the Latter-day Saints were. She told me that they were family-oriented people who lived “Out West” and believed that Jesus had visited America. This was pretty much the extent of my education about Mormonism until I was a tenured professor. Thus when I decided to study the Book of Mormon, I hardly knew where to begin. There is a vast body of scholarship on the text, but it mainly assumes an audience that has grown up with the book and believes it to be a holy scripture. I wanted to enter this conversation as a scholar of early US literature and as someone who loved the book immediately upon reading it but did not believe it to be a sacred text. Unlike many of its commenters, then, I needed an introduction to the
Book of Mormon. That need took me to a variety of places, including the Hill Cumorah Pageant (best research trip ever). It will perhaps come as no surprise that Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon* was an essential part of my earliest engagements with the text and is still a work to which I turn for insight and information. In my reading, Hardy’s book stands as both a brilliant effort to reach across a variety of thresholds—of method, of interpretation, of perspective—and a reminder that some divides, despite our best efforts but perhaps for good reason, always will remain.

The task Hardy undertakes is ambitious. Responding to Richard Bushman’s dismay that the book “has never been examined in its full complexity by outside scholars” and Nathan Hatch’s assertion that Mormonism has received far more attention than its central text, Hardy explores the Book of Mormon as a whole and as a work of literature. This approach might seem sensible enough, but it is fraught with difficulty. On the one hand, the text is large and unwieldy; attempting a study of it is akin to writing about, say, *Moby Dick* or *Paradise Lost*—not impossible, of course, but not exactly easy. Then there is a more pressing question of audience. As Hardy notes, his assertion that the Book of Mormon can be read as a coherent work of literature has the potential to rankle believers and nonbelievers alike. Mormon readers often have overlooked the text’s organizing literary principles, he contends, because they “have been so overwhelmed by the needs of practical theology and the desire to defend the book’s historicity” (p. xiv).\(^1\) Given the history of anti-Mormonism in the United States, this is understandable. Non-Mormons have tended to dismiss the book entirely, preferring to critique the religion that emerged from it rather than deal with the text itself. (Indeed, when I first tried to publish my article on the Book of Mormon’s depictions of history writing, a rejection letter I received from one journal was accompanied by reader reports stating that the text held no value for nonbelievers and was an inappropriate object of critical study.) *Understanding the Book of Mormon* attempts to cut across these different limits in thinking by

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engaging directly with the text using a framework offered by narrative theory. To this end, Hardy asserts that

reading the Book of Mormon well—that is, comprehensively, 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—requires a recognition of the central role played by its three major narrators: Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. (p. xiv)

Treating the book’s voices as narrative functions, Hardy hopes, will allow believers and nonbelievers alike to at least temporarily bracket the questions of historicity that have framed so many discussions of the Book of Mormon and examine the text on its own terms. What Hardy finds through this approach is that the Book of Mormon’s literary and theological concerns are deeply entwined and cannot be understood properly apart from each other.

In assessing the Book of Mormon as a composite of three narrative voices, Hardy offers a macro view of the text that I think will be of use to any reader. The Book of Mormon’s account of its own composition—combined with the story of its nineteenth-century translation—is one of its most daunting features. Plates within plates (brass, gold, large, small), translations of abridged copies, missing pages, buried originals, biblical resonances, and narratives out of sequence combine to make the book a marvelous but at times frustrating reading experience. Readers looking for a starting point to understand or rethink the text will find Hardy’s initial, explanatory chapters and introductions to the narrators to be of great value. Hardy begins with ten “quick, relatively uncontroversial observations about the text,” noting that believers and nonbelievers may “account for these features differently” but asserting that all readers should be able to agree about some basic characteristics of the book (p. 4). I did chuckle at Hardy’s qualification of his statement, “relatively,” because my own experience working on the Book of Mormon has left me with the impression that there might be nothing about it that is entirely free of controversy. Still, Hardy’s statement that the book is long
(and that its “mission could have been accomplished more concisely”) seems reasonable enough (p. 5). Some of his other assertions—that, for example, the text imitates the style of the King James Bible and is a “human artifact”—might be more or less relatively uncontroversial. As a whole, though, this list of basic properties clears a space for readers to consider the work not as a collection of verses but instead as a constructed whole. Hardy admits that this outline of basic features might not make a strong case for careful reading, but his subsequent focus on the narrators does provide a scaffold for more detailed analysis. In dividing his study into assessments of each narrator, Hardy gives shape not only to his own argument but also to that long book itself. Readers accustomed to encountering the Book of Mormon as decontextualized verses or individual stories might be surprised to read about a Nephi who at times subordinates story details to his didactic aims, a Mormon who views history as theology, and a Moroni who struggles with the very demands of authorship. Refracted through these lenses, the Book of Mormon’s different sections take a clearer shape, and some of their more literary properties come to light.

In the spirit of narrative theory, Hardy catalogs a variety of textual features in the Book of Mormon. This is a particularly useful approach for readers interested in drawing formal or thematic connections among the book’s different sections. Hardy’s assessment of Nephi, for example, includes an analysis of 2 Nephi’s iterative phrasing, showing how its promise of an interpretation of Isaiah in chapter 25 incorporates words from its own earlier story of Joseph’s prophecy regarding the brass plates. Hardy illustrates these echoes of 2 Nephi 3 in 2 Nephi 25–33 with an easy-to-follow table showing the overlapping phrases. The repetitions, Hardy argues, allow Nephi to turn an exegesis of Isaiah into “a deliberate, creative synthesis of his own revelations, the writings of Isaiah, and the prophecy of Joseph” (p. 81). One of the best things about Hardy’s book, I think, is the attention it pays to the Book of Mormon’s internal intertextuality. In this particular case, a reader easily could miss the reappearance of 2 Nephi 3 in simply trying to follow the action, but once Hardy points it out, many interpretive possibilities
follow. The great care Hardy has taken with the text is evident throughout *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, as he time and again offers shrewd observations about how the book is constructed. His valuable insights include (but are not limited to) a comprehensive inventory of every kind of narrative intervention deployed by Mormon (p. 97); a rereading of the chiastic structure of Alma 36 (p. 140); an account of Mormon's reworking of the Gospel of Matthew in 3 Nephi (p. 196); a list of phrases connecting the story of the Nephites to that of the Jaredites (p. 232); and a table showing Moroni’s narrative interventions linked with his references to Christ (p. 236). Throughout *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Hardy deploys the closest of close reading, highlighting the formal properties of the text and thereby discovering patterns that other readers might miss. His readings of these features are often quite prescient, but even readers who disagree with Hardy’s conclusions will find that he has laid significant groundwork for further inquiry into the text.

One of the most productive aspects of Hardy’s focus on narrators is the attention it allows him to pay to the various workings of chronology in the text. Hardy is adept at tracing the often-convoluted timelines at play in the Book of Mormon and highlighting some of the ways in which the book marshals temporality in order to achieve its literary aims. This is perhaps most true in his explication of Mormon’s lengthy narrative. As Hardy notes, Mormon, despite his ostensible commitment to historical linearity, moves simultaneously forward and backward in time. While on the one hand, “Mormon employs an explicit, strict chronology” (p. 103) when it comes to events in Nephite history, his narration also defers an account of his own history, operates through flashback, and incorporates embedded documents narrated by other voices. I was particularly taken with Hardy’s explanation of Mormon’s rendering of the Nephite reformation, which, he points out, includes both a flashback detailing Alma’s life and a “subsidiary flashback” telling the story of Aaron’s imprisonment. Through these tangentially connected story lines, the text reminds readers that events are transpiring synchronically. This is just one example of many in which Hardy
unravels a perplexing scene, and because he pinpoints the verses where such shifts in time occur, it is easy for a reader to turn to the Book of Mormon and see how it creates temporal complexity. Hardy’s work suggests that simultaneity is an ever-present concern in the Book of Mormon, a book that not only presents many stories at once but also is itself a simultaneous story, a history running parallel to the Bible on the other side of the world. I think Hardy could do even more with the tension generated by Mormon’s presentation of the relentless march of history on the one hand, and the at-times-jarring departures from chronology on the other. He notes, for example, that Mormon offers a scant account of his personal history only after he has provided about three hundred pages of Nephite history. This approach to biography is quite different from that of Nephi, whose family history is the reader’s entry point into the Book of Mormon. Hardy interprets these different approaches to history as functions of the personalities and aims of the narrators in question, but it might also be fruitful to consider the implications of the appearance of such diverse approaches to history within a single text. Do Nephi’s and Mormon’s varying presentations of chronology, for example, allow the text to comment on the relationship between familial histories and national histories? Beyond assigning motives to its narrators, how might we make sense of the text’s numerous and shifting timeline(s)? This is perhaps an unfair criticism to level at a book that is doing the heavy lifting of laying out as many of the text’s narrative features as possible, but I often found myself wishing Hardy would move even further beyond identifying these moments of temporal confusion in the text and assess them apart from the narrators who give them voice. That said, Understanding the Book of Mormon provides important analysis and, perhaps more importantly, opens up the possibility of even more extensive study of the text’s varied uses of time.

Although he mainly assesses the Book of Mormon’s superstructure, Hardy deftly pinpoints significant moments throughout the text and shows readers how instances of disruption and dissimulation point to some of the work’s most pressing concerns. One of the best of his many fine close readings appears early in his study, when he analyzes the scene
in which Nephi brings the brass plates to Lehi after killing Laban. “And it came to pass that after we had come down into the wilderness unto our father,” Nephi writes,

> Behold, he was filled with joy, and also my mother, Sariah, was exceedingly glad, for she truly had mourned because of us. For she had supposed that we had perished in the wilderness; and she also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man; saying: Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness. And after this manner of language had my mother complained against my father. (1 Nephi 5:1–3)

As Hardy explains, this passage bears several remarkable features: it disrupts the telling of the main story with a flashback detailing a domestic dispute, shows a woman taking issue with her husband’s decisions, and interrupts its own flow to quote that woman directly. This last is perhaps the most intriguing, because, in Hardy’s words, “Nephi never quotes women” (p. 18). Sariah’s voice, which appears just once more in the text, is the only female one Nephi ventriloquizes. Hardy performs a smart reading of this passage, showing how Sariah’s maternal anxiety combines with Lehi’s assertion that he knew the Lord would “deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban” to portray Nephi and his brothers “as vulnerable, potential victims rather than perpetrators of a deed [the killing of the sleeping Laban] that, without a considerable amount of explanation, would look a lot like murder and robbery” (p. 19). Through the mother’s voice, the sons become children again, delivered by providence rather than through violence. This strikes me as a useful way of understanding Nephi’s narration, which Hardy argues is carefully designed to achieve didactic effects, even if that sometimes entails the omission or flattening of particularities. Read in this light, the scene also suggests the complex interplay of familial and national histories in Nephi’s narrative. The Book of Mormon will eventually tell the stories of thousands of people over hundreds of years, but it begins with the story of one family in turmoil. The momentary intrusion and
immediate silencing of Sariah, then, might be read also as signal that the text ultimately will abandon its domestic narrative in favor of a national one spoken almost exclusively by men.

Because Hardy’s work pays such close attention to narrative voice, it is well poised to assess what I think is one of the Book of Mormon’s most interesting features: its frequent and often seamless incorporation of biblical passages. In his section on Nephi, for example, Hardy tackles the question of why (and how) so much Isaiah appears in the text more or less whole cloth. “For readers who see Smith as the author,” Hardy writes,

The easiest explanation is that the eighteen chapters of Isaiah in First and Second Nephi are filler, employed when his creativity flagged or because he felt the need to pad the narrative. . . . Believers, on the other hand, often see the Isaiah portions as preserving a version of Isaiah older and more accurate than anything else available today. (p. 66)

Hardy attempts a more nuanced explanation than either of these and thus lines up the relevant verses from each text, assesses their individual contexts, and highlights their often-minute distinctions. As he notes, rather than simply parroting the Isaiah of the Authorized Version verbatim, the Book of Mormon contains an altered Isaiah, as roughly half of its verses differ at least slightly from the biblical text. These distinctions range from the probably innocuous—in one instance, “eye” simply becomes “eyes”—to the potentially profound—Isaiah 13:15 promises, “Every one that is found shall be thrust through,” but 2 Nephi 23:15 insists that “every one that is proud shall be thrust through” (p. 67, emphasis mine). Since the Book of Mormon itself offers no explanation for these variations, Hardy writes that it is “difficult to know what to make of all this” (p. 67). Still, he contends that when viewed within the larger context of Nephi’s narrative project, the not-quite-exact copying of Isaiah appears to situate the Book of Mormon’s narrator himself within an unfolding biblical history. Hardy demonstrates this most clearly in his analysis of 1 Nephi’s revision of Isaiah 48, which includes additions that change the probable subject of the text from Cyrus of
Persia to Nephi himself (p. 73). Rather than deeming this a product of mere narrative arrogance, Hardy reads Nephi’s adjustment of Isaiah as a conscious shifting of the concern of the text from the Persian conquest of Babylon to “Nephi’s own predictions about the much more distant gathering of other branches of the House of Israel, including the descendants of Lehi” (pp. 73–74). The Isaiah that appears in the Book of Mormon, then, broadens its prophetic reach both spatially and temporally, encompassing Nephi’s America and allowing him to write to an audience in the distant future. I found this reading thought provoking. This is an avenue of inquiry that deserves more critical attention than Hardy’s book can give it, but his meticulous cataloguing of both Isaiah texts is a model for future study and an important step in considering the biblical resonances in the Book of Mormon.

As Hardy shows, the Bible appears not only as citations in the Book of Mormon but also, more frequently, through allusion. Numerous stories in the text bear striking similarities to biblical narratives, and the language in which those stories are told often overlaps with the Bible in phrasing or rhythm. So in addition to assessing particular verses that appear in both works, Hardy interprets passages of the Book of Mormon that evoke the Bible less directly. My favorite instance of this appears in his section on Moroni, which offers a lovely reading of the book of Ether. Focusing on the passage in which the preexistent Christ appears to Jared’s brother, Hardy shows that, through allusions, Moroni presents Genesis in reverse. As Hardy puts it, “several key incidents and phrases seem to indicate that Moroni arranged his abridgment up to this point as a reversal of the fall of man, tracing major events from the Garden of Eden to the Tower of Babel backward” (p. 241). And, indeed, the story of the Jaredites begins with a divine confounding of language, then progresses to the building of a great ship, the chastising of the Jaredites for their wickedness, their expulsion into the wilderness, and the Lord’s assertion that Jared has been “created after mine own [divine] image” (p. 242). All of this, Hardy notes, culminates in Christ telling Jared’s brother, “Ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore ye are brought back into my presence; therefore I show myself unto you” (p. 241). Backwards from Babel, through flood
and fall, Jared’s brother achieves the status of prelapsarian man. This is a wonderful moment in the Book of Mormon; it links the text to the Bible in a poignant and creative way while simultaneously presenting its alternative narrative order as the solution to the problem of the fall. It also links Moroni to Mormon and Nephi. Reading Hardy’s book, it becomes possible to see that each of these narrative voices is concerned with how seemingly linear events necessarily appear out of sequence once they enter into narrative (at the very least, the past erupts into the present simply by being told). Nephi struggles with the problem of knowing how a story will end before it begins, and Mormon tries to make the past present in order to prophesy a coming future. Moroni’s own reluctant narrative attempts to remedy one past with another, all while living in a destroyed present. By the end of Moroni’s narrative, it has become clear that saving the Nephites was never the Book of Mormon’s project. The rescue of Jared’s brother from the fall did not protect the Jaredites from extinction, and Moroni’s rendering of that rescue will not save the Nephites any more than Mormon’s history did or Nephi’s prophecies could. All of its narrators write of dead and dying civilizations, though, in the hopes of creating a redemptive future.

Thus far I have discussed what I view as some of the most productive aspects of *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. The text is true to its title; it certainly helped me to understand the Book of Mormon, and I consider it an invaluable source for the study of the text. But I’d like to return to where I began this essay and consider more carefully the book’s effort to reorient critical conversation around the text and thereby cross the interpretive threshold between believing and nonbelieving readers. For Hardy, a focus on narrators seems one way to talk around the problem of historicity, because narrative strategies, at least in theory, can be discussed on their own, in terms of their structural properties, without recourse to authorial intent. Remove the author from the picture, by this logic, and you free the text from the burden of history. The Book of Mormon contains repetition, chiasm, intertextuality, and flashback—those facts are undeniable—but whether those features were crafted by divine order or no, in Mesoamerica or Palmyra, New York,
becomes irrelevant, at least from a literary perspective, once the narrative voice is unhinged from everything beyond what it speaks. This sounds like great middle ground, but by the end of *Understanding the Book of Mormon* I was dubious about Hardy’s claim that a discussion of narrators could sidestep the text’s controversial history. This is because it turns out (and maybe is no surprise) that talk about narrators can sound a lot like talk about real people. While Hardy’s approach allows him to generate important observations about the structure of the text, it also creates rhetorical space in which, for all his disavowals, he can talk about Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as if they are historical figures.

In the context of narrative theory, narrators are devices designed to achieve particular effects just like other narrative elements (perspective, narratee, author function, etc.). They are not conscious beings, because they are not beings at all (though, of course, well-designed narrators create the illusion of realness). The Book of Mormon’s main voices often appear in Hardy’s work, though, as thinking subjects driven by goals and motives rather than by the imperatives of the narrative. Thus when he asks, “When does Nephi come to realize that the book he is writing is actually the same book he saw in vision several decades earlier?” Hardy turns discussion of a narrator to speculation about an author (p. 77). Narrators do not have realizations, though narrative technique may produce the effect of realization in a text. Slippage between narrator and author appears throughout *Understanding the Book of Mormon*: Hardy assigns “historiographical inclination” and “literary ambitions” to Mormon (pp. 102, 110), and he notes that Moroni “appears to be a very reticent author” (p. 218). At one point, Hardy even says that he has been “speaking of Mormon as if he were a historical figure,” but then moves forward with his analysis as if this is not a serious interpretive issue (p. 114). Thus although he has made the case that narrative theory can cut the Gordian knot of historicity, his conflation of narrator and author functions actually allows Hardy to treat the book as a Mesoamerican artifact but not say that he is doing so. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* thus does not extricate itself from the question of authenticity; its very mode of analysis, in the end, allows a degree of unspoken apologism.
This isn’t necessarily a bad thing; I just found myself often wishing that Hardy would be more up front and transparent about it.

I would level a similar criticism at moments when Hardy entertains interpretations of the text that fall outside the purview of LDS readings. Although I appreciate his attempts to consider diverse readings of the Book of Mormon, Hardy’s voicing of nonbelievers’ potential explanations for the text’s various features often reads like parody. When introducing Moroni, for example, Hardy notes, “Perhaps the Book of Mormon could have ended [with Mormon’s narrative], but it does not; . . . we find ourselves in the hands of yet another narrator” (p. 217). As explanation for the sudden appearance of Moroni, Hardy writes, “Apparently [Mormon] died before he could complete his book; either that or Joseph Smith’s literary exuberance and delight in creating new characters led him to continue the story just a little longer” (pp. 217–18). Put this way, the notion that Moroni is not the text’s author sounds preposterous. “Exuberance and delight” seem very silly reasons to create a new narrator. And why would anyone continue writing an already-too-long book? Rendered as a false binary—either Mormon died, or Joseph Smith got carried away—the possibility of interpreting Moroni’s narration in a critically responsible but nonbelieving vein appears impossible. But, of course, there are plenty of different ways to account for the presence of Moroni in the text, and Hardy’s own book offers several reasons why that final narrator is crucial to the book’s larger project. His reading of the book of Ether’s narrative repair of the fall is itself excellent evidence for the importance of the Moroni chapters. With Moroni’s voice, as Hardy notes, the Book of Mormon simultaneously finishes the story of the Nephites and performs a kind of narrative resistance to conclusion. Through its series of false stops and restarts, allusion, and apparent anachronism, Moroni’s narration speaks to the difficult project of concluding a sacred text. What, after all, should be the final word on a chosen people, a prophecy, a divine calling? How can a text that pries open a spiritual canon and asserts the prospect of more texts and more histories draw itself to a close? Part of the Book of Mormon’s appeal for me—a nonbeliever who finds much of
value in the book—is its radical reimagining of what it means to write a scripture and its reassessment of the seemingly inviolable boundaries of revealed religion. Moroni’s narrative plays an integral role in what I would deem the book’s most significant challenge to orthodox notions of canonicity, and I would not reduce its importance to mere authorial delight. It is hard to blame Hardy for constructing an imagined reader who simply dismisses the Book of Mormon and explains all of its most interesting features away by evoking the specter of a wild-eyed Joseph Smith. Such readers exist; they have since 1830. But if, as Hardy asserts, the Book of Mormon is a more complex and interesting text than most people (LDS readers included) have realized, then perhaps unorthodox readings could move beyond tired arguments about Smith and offer fresh insights into the work itself. The divide between interpretations born of belief and unbelief might be blurrier than Hardy’s work allows.

When I first encountered Understanding the Book of Mormon, I was simply grateful a book of its kind existed. It is an indispensable work for anyone trying to gain a clearer sense of the Book of Mormon’s structural and thematic concerns, and it contains many beautiful readings of the text. I would recommend it to any student of the Book of Mormon, regardless of his or her particular beliefs, because it is both a fine analysis of the book and a great example of lucid scholarly writing. And as I noted at the beginning of this essay, Hardy’s work makes a worthy effort to reach across numerous interpretive divides, offering analyses that could be of use to a variety of readers for a range of purposes. There are, however, some thresholds that cannot be crossed, at least not fully. Much as I admire the Book of Mormon and think it an essential work in the canon of US literature, I do not believe its account of its own creation to be true. This view necessarily sets limits around what I can read into and out of the text. The same could be said for Hardy, though his position relative to the book is quite different from mine. In some ways, although we are talking about the same text, Hardy and I always will be talking about different books. His Book of Mormon is a Mesoamerican scripture; mine is a nineteenth-century epic. Try though it may, Understanding the Book of Mormon doesn’t really entertain the possibility
that the Book of Mormon might be a work of fiction; and though the mystery surrounding the text is part of what makes it appealing to me, my work resolutely situates the Book of Mormon within the context of the antebellum United States. There is no critical methodology capable of closing the gap between these perspectives without leaving a seam. As Hardy’s work shows, even narrative theory, with its ostensibly neutral labels and descriptions of textual features, cannot square positions as irreconcilable as belief and unbelief. In reconsidering *Understanding the Book of Mormon* for this review, though, I have come to think that the Book of Mormon’s most important feature might, in the end, be its utter resistance to uniform reading. If the book’s predictions about itself are correct, the day will come when all readers will understand it perfectly. For now, though, it inhabits a universe in which disagreements about its most basic features—author, medium, language, time period—persist. Rather than viewing it as a problem to be solved or a truth to be told, though, literary critics could embrace the challenge the Book of Mormon poses to our most basic assumptions about what constitutes a literary text, what we need to know about a book in order to analyze it, and the ostensible neutrality of our approaches. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* cannot efface the distinctions among its readers or those of its primary text; no work of criticism can. In remaining faithful to the text and its formal properties, though, as well as to his own position, Hardy’s book provides all readers with a clear vantage point from which to consider the Book of Mormon and assess it on their own terms. *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, if I may belabor the metaphor, might not cross every threshold, but it certainly opens many doors.

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An Apologetically Important Nonapologetic Book

Daniel C. Peterson

In Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide, Grant Hardy has written what I believe must be considered, from a certain perspective, one of the most important books ever published about the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon has seldom been read so carefully and intelligently. I say that this volume is very significant “from a certain perspective,” though, because while it brilliantly addresses aspects of the Book of Mormon, the aspects that it addresses are not, from a believer’s point of view, its most vital elements. The Book of Mormon isn’t primarily a historical text; analyzing it as historiography doesn’t reach its doctrinal or hortatory core, let alone its significance as a witness of Christ.

That said, however, Hardy’s approach is one that I think both extremely important and deeply interesting—and, I will argue here, it is one that provides significant support for a decision to take the Book of Mormon’s doctrinal message, its prophetic exhortations, and its testimony of the Savior as true.

Grant Hardy majored in classical Greek at Brigham Young University and then earned a PhD in Chinese literature from Yale. That’s an unusually wide-ranging and exceptionally appropriate background for someone who has devoted a great deal of his scholarly attention to the history of historiography; from the Greek historians to the Chinese chronicles, he is able to have a global perspective on the subject. Now
a professor of history and religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Asheville (where he formerly chaired the Department of History), he specializes in premodern historical writing. Columbia University Press published his *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian’s Conquest of History* in 1999, Greenwood issued his coauthored *The Establishment of the Han Empire and Imperial China* in 2005, and his coedited *Oxford History of Historical Writing, Volume I: Beginnings to AD 600* appeared in 2011. And, in significant addition to those works, Hardy had made a name for himself even before *Understanding the Book of Mormon* with his *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition*, which was published by the University of Illinois Press in 2003.

“My basic thesis,” Hardy writes at the beginning of *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, “is that the Book of Mormon is a much more interesting text—rewarding sustained critical attention—than has generally been acknowledged by either Mormons or non-Mormons” (p. xvii). It’s a thesis that faces considerable opposition, since the consensus of non-Mormon opinion on the subject was established very early and, in many circles, has been fixed virtually in stone for nearly two hundred years. Hardy himself cites the claim of one 1841 critic that the Book of Mormon is “mostly a blind mass of words, interwoven with scriptural language and quotations, without much of a leading plan or design. It is in fact such a production as might be expected from a person of Smith’s abilities and turn of mind” (p. xiv). But he could have multiplied similar judgments many times over. “The book of Mormon is a bungling and stupid production,” said one 1840 publication. Daniel Kidder’s 1842 exposé found it “nothing but a medley of incoherent absurdities.”

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“bundle of gibberish,” wrote J. B. Turner, also in 1842.4 In 1930, Bernard DeVoto pronounced the Book of Mormon “a yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless, and inconceivably absurd.”5 And such opinions are difficult to dislodge, since, as the Catholic sociologist Thomas O’Dea observed nearly six decades ago, “the Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it.”6

Many critics have faulted the Book of Mormon not so much for what it actually is but for what they assume it must inevitably be. “It is a surprisingly big book,” wrote Hugh Nibley, supplying quite enough rope for a charlatan to hang himself a hundred times. As the work of an imposter it must unavoidably bear all the marks of fraud. It should be poorly organized, shallow, artificial, patchy, and unoriginal. It should display a pretentious vocabulary (the Book of Mormon uses only 3,000 words), overdrawn stock characters, melodramatic situations, gaudy and overdone descriptions, and bombastic diction. . . .

Whether one believes its story or not, the severest critic of the Book of Mormon, if he reads it with care at all, must admit that it is the exact opposite. . . . It is carefully organized, specific, sober, factual, and perfectly consistent.7

In this context, Hardy refers to the Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Daniel Walker Howe, who has written that “the Book of Mormon should rank among the great achievements of American literature, but it has never been accorded the status it deserves, since Mormons deny Joseph

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Smith’s authorship, and non-Mormons, dismissing the book as a fraud, have been more likely to ridicule than to read it.”

Those who refuse to read the Book of Mormon are, naturally, quite unlikely ever to recognize its remarkable qualities. Perhaps, though, books such as Understanding the Book of Mormon and Terryl Givens’s path-breaking By the Hand of Mormon can awaken interest among non-Mormons in actually taking a look at a long-neglected volume. We can hope.

Mainstream Latter-day Saints, of course, believe the Book of Mormon to have been written more than a millennium and a half ago, so it’s scarcely surprising if, as Howe notices, they’re unenthusiastic about having it recognized as a work of modern American literature, however “great” it may be adjudged to be. But even devout readers of the book can certainly benefit from coming to a deeper understanding of its literary richness and complexity, and, on this point, Grant Hardy is a superb guide.

Hardy directly confronts allegations that the Book of Mormon is “bungling,” “stupid,” “incoherent,” “gibberish,” “a blind mass of words . . . without much of a leading plan or design,” “formless,” and “aimless.” “If we keep our focus squarely on the narrative,” he observes, “it turns out that there is an organizing principle at work, but it is fairly subtle” (p. xiv).

“The Book of Mormon,” he says, “is an extraordinarily rich text,” featuring a “complicated narrative” (p. xii) that “appears to be a carefully constructed artifact” (p. xv). He provides a glimpse of the complex narrative history embodied in the text via a quick summary, early in his book:

Not only are there more than a thousand years of history involving some two hundred named individuals and nearly a hundred distinct places, but the narrative itself is presented as the work of three primary editor/historians—Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. These figures, in turn, claim to have based their accounts on dozens of preexisting records. The result is a complex mix that incorporates multiple genres ranging from straightforward narration to inserted sermons and letters to scriptural commentary and poetry. It requires considerable patience to work out all the details of chronology, geography, genealogy, and source records,

8. Cited on page 11, as well as, partially, on page xi.
but the Book of Mormon is remarkably consistent on all this. The chronology is handled virtually without glitches, despite several flashbacks and temporally overlapping narratives; there are only two potential geographical discrepancies (at Alma 51:26 and 53:6); and the narrators keep straight both the order and family connections among the twenty-six Nephite record keepers and forty-one Jaredite kings (including rival lines). (pp. 6–7)

“If the Book of Mormon is a work of fiction,” he remarks with such things in mind, “it is more intricate and clever than has heretofore been acknowledged” (p. xv).

Although himself a believer (of an admittedly skeptical sort, as shown in his entry on the website “Mormon Scholars Testify”), Hardy has deliberately framed his book in a way that will be accessible and acceptable to both the faithful and those outside the household of faith. Thus, he sets the question of historicity or authorship aside: “I 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).

Of course, as Hardy implies, reading it as literature doesn’t entail that the Book of Mormon lacks authentic historical content. Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, Tacitus, Gibbon, and, for that matter, the Bible can all be read as literature without denying that they are discussing genuine historical persons and events. Many superb historians have also been fine literary craftsmen. The question of historicity transcends the type of literary analysis that Hardy has in mind:

Someone, somewhere, made choices about how the narrative of the Book of Mormon was to be constructed. We can look closely at the text—how it is arranged, how it uses language, how it portrays itself, how it conveys its main points—without worrying too much about whether the mind ultimately responsible for such decisions was that of Mormon or Joseph Smith. So I propose bracketing, at least temporarily, questions of historicity in favor of a detailed

examination of what the Book of Mormon is and how it operates. In the chapters that follow I will outline the major features of the book and illustrate some of the literary strategies employed by the narrators. It does not matter much to my approach whether these narrators were actual historical figures or whether they were fictional characters created by Joseph Smith; their role in the narrative is the same in either case. After all, narrative is a mode of communication employed by both historians and novelists. (p. xvi)

“Rather than making a case for Smith’s prophetic claims,” he explains, “I want to demonstrate a mode of literary analysis by which all readers, regardless of their prior religious commitments or lack thereof, can discuss the book in useful and accurate ways” (p. xvii). “I will leave it to others to prove or disprove the historical and religious claims of the book; my goal is to help anyone interested in the Book of Mormon, for whatever reason, become a better, more perceptive reader” (p. xviii).

He seeks, thereby, to enable calm and dispassionate discussion of the Book of Mormon even among those who differ over its origin and religious importance: “If we shift our attention away from Joseph Smith and back to the Book of Mormon itself, a common discourse becomes possible” (p. xvi). This is an entirely appropriate attitude for a book published by the secular Oxford University Press and aspiring to reach an audience beyond the community of believers.

The uniqueness of *Understanding the Book of Mormon* consists, to a large extent, in the specific technique that Hardy employs to go about his task. And that technique, in its turn, rests upon unique characteristics of the Book of Mormon. “Latter-day Saints,” he says,
of known abridgers with precise dates, life stories, and motivations. From its first verses, the extended first-person narrative of Nephi offers a mode of writing almost entirely absent from the Hebrew Bible (the only exceptions are a few chapters of Ezra-Nehemiah). This means that the primary narrators of the Book of Mormon—Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni—are accessible to readers in a way that the dominant narrative voice of the Bible is not. (pp. 14–15)

With this in mind, the principal feature of his method is to “offer character studies of figures from the Book of Mormon—particularly the three major narrators—and [to] write about them, in many ways, as if they were real people” (p. 23). And it turns out, under his meticulous and fruitful analysis, that “Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni are major characters themselves, and each has a distinctive life story, perspective, set of concerns, style, and sensibility” (p. xv). “These figures each possess a distinct literary identity, which is manifest not just by what they say but by how they say it” (p. 266).

Nephi

Hardy discusses his three historian-narrators—Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni—in the order of their lives within the narrative of the Book of Mormon. So, naturally, he commences with Nephi, who came over with his father, Lehi, from Jerusalem. “When we read First and Second Nephi with ‘resistance and imagination,’ as James O’Donnell says of his own study of Augustine, a character emerges that is more complex and interesting than many readers first assume” (p. 83).

Nephi is not merely interesting, though. He seems real. “Whether Nephi operates as a fictional character or an ancient prophet,” writes Hardy, “he presents a life story with a particular point of view, a theological vision, an agenda, and a characteristic style of writing” (p. 13). “Clearly,” Hardy remarks,

there is an active mind at work here, one that is colored by his experiences, his sense of audience, and his desire for order. Readers will always be divided on whether that mind is ultimately Nephi’s or Joseph Smith’s, but it is possible to recover from the text a coherent personality within the multiple time frames, the different levels of narrative, and the extensive intertextual borrowings. (p. 84)

But surely, at this point, a believer in the genuine antiquity of the Book of Mormon can be pardoned for pointing out that the most natural way to account for this “active mind,” this “coherent personality,” is to assume an actual, historical Nephi. “Some of Nephi’s theological concerns are picked up by other figures in the Book of Mormon,” Hardy writes, “but a fair amount of what occupies his attention is unique; he has a distinct voice” (p. 84).

Hardy’s self-avowed methodological indifference to the question of the distinct historicity of his three “principal narrators” is actually—and, in my view, significantly—difficult to maintain in practice, and in the face of the data supplied by the text of the Book of Mormon.

Mormon

Mormon’s voice—“sorrowful, humane, moralistic, and precise” (p. 97)—is quite distinct from Nephi’s. In other words, “it turns out that there is another mind at work in the text” (p. 90). “Clearly Mormon shares some of Nephi’s concerns—deliverance, faith, revelation, and Christian theology—but his narrative style is distinct” (p. 91).

For example, Mormon “never includes contextless sermons and has little to say about the House of Israel or the last days.” He “does not focus on his own life or reinterpret scriptures creatively, and most of all, he is not a visionary” (p. 84).

In Mormon’s writing,

stories and sermons are set within a thick historical framework and strict chronology, with years ticking by like clockwork. He
does not offer much scriptural exegesis, and he has little interest in House of Israel connections or messiah theology—the word messiah occurs twenty-three times in Nephi’s writings but only twice in Mormon’s work (and never in Moroni’s). Mormon is more attuned to narrative theology, that is, in showing how theological points are manifest or illustrated in particular events, and his fascination with prophecy is not so much reading himself into past revelations as using prophecies and their fulfillments to persuade his readers that God is directing history.

Yet perhaps the most striking difference between Nephi and Mormon is how much the latter sees himself as a historian, with a responsibility to tell the story of his civilization comprehensively and accurately. It may have been that Nephi’s first version of his life story was equally concerned with the details of political and social change (“the wars and contentions and destructions of my people”; 1 Ne. 19:4), but what we see in First and Second Nephi is as much meditation as memoir. It is a spiritual reflection rather than a conventional historical narrative. Mormon’s historiographical impulse, by contrast, is manifest in his meticulous attention to chronology and geography. (p. 91)

Moroni

The third of Hardy’s three principal narrators in the Book of Mormon, Moroni, “employs extensive allusion as a strategy” (p. 254). In his writing, “the sheer number of identifiable allusions, combined with patterns manifest in their usage, suggest a deliberate strategy at work rather than merely a linguistic patina overlaid on the basic narrative by an author who is well versed in the language of scripture” (p. 249). Hardy concludes from these numerous allusions that “it appears that Moroni is not so much composing this conclusion as constructing it, extracting phrases from particular texts by Nephi and Mormon in order to weave them together and thereby unify the voices of these two illustrious predecessors” (p. 254).

But Moroni’s work on the abridgment of the record of the Jaredites—which appears in the Book of Mormon today as the book of Ether—offers
up a surprise that most readers will not have suspected. “In a startling act of literary appropriation,” writes Hardy,

he Christianizes the Jaredite record. . . . The idea that the Jaredites did not know about Jesus will come as a surprise to most Latter-day Saints. At first glance, the Jaredite story does not seem that different from what we have seen elsewhere in the Book of Mormon; Christ is mentioned regularly and reverently. Yet if one were to go through the book of Ether with a red pencil and differentiate Moroni’s direct narrator’s comments from his paraphrase of the twenty-four plates, it would soon become obvious that, with a single exception, specific references to Jesus Christ appear only in Moroni’s editorial remarks. (p. 235)

The single exception, of course, is the appearance of the premortal Savior to the brother of Jared, as recorded in Ether 2–3. But that prophet is told to write an account of his experience, seal it up, and never speak of it thereafter (see Ether 3:14, 21–22). And, says Hardy, “The remainder of the book of Ether reads as if that is precisely what happened” (p. 236).

Thus—although Hardy raises the issue himself—it seems reasonable, given the intense focus on Christ so characteristic of the Book of Mormon in general and of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni in particular, to view the book of Ether, when stripped of Moroni’s Christ-centered editorial interpolations, as a fourth very distinct Book of Mormon voice.

Back to Joseph Smith

As I’ve noted above, Hardy adopts as his methodological rule in Understanding the Book of Mormon a “shift [of] attention away from Joseph Smith and back to the Book of Mormon itself,” partly as a way of making “a common discourse . . . possible” (p. xvi). I endorse this as an appropriate mode of discourse, a valid approach. However, I will apply his work here in an apologetic fashion. First, though, some historical and text-historical background.
Royal Skousen has devoted roughly a quarter of a century to intensive study of the text of the Book of Mormon and most especially to the original and printer’s manuscripts of the book. He knows more about those manuscripts and the dictation process, as well as the book’s subsequent textual history, than anybody else in the history of the church ever has. Notably, in his judgment, the evidence strongly supports the traditional account of the origin of the Book of Mormon and doesn’t support the notion that Joseph Smith composed the text himself or took it from any other existing manuscript.\(^\text{11}\)

A significant element of that traditional account portrays the original manuscript as having been orally dictated. The kinds of errors that appear in the manuscript are clearly those that would occur when a scribe has misheard, as opposed to errors that would result from visually misreading a letter or a word while copying from another manuscript. (The printer’s manuscript, by contrast, shows precisely the types of anomalies that one would expect from a copyist’s errors.)\(^\text{12}\)

The witnesses to the translation of the Book of Mormon are unanimous that Joseph Smith had no books, manuscripts, or papers with him during the process, which involved quite lengthy periods of dictation.\(^\text{13}\) For example, in an interview with her son, Joseph Smith III, that took place only a short time before she died, Emma Smith insisted that Joseph had no text with him during the work of translation:

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Q. Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?
A. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.
Q. Could he not have had, and you not know it?
A. If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.14

“In writing for your father,” she told her son,

I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us. . . .

The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.15

Thus, Emma Smith could speak authoritatively regarding the period during which she herself served as scribe. But what about the much longer period when it was Oliver Cowdery who was taking the dictation? In fact, Emma could speak from personal experience with respect to that time, as well. While they were in Harmony, Pennsylvania—where most of the Book of Mormon text was committed to writing—Emma says that Joseph and Oliver were not far away from her:

Q. Where did father and Oliver Cowdery write?
A. Oliver Cowdery and your father wrote in the room where I was at work.16

15. Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 289–90; also in Vogel, Early Mormon Documents, 1:541. Original spellings have been retained.
Not long after speaking with her, Joseph III wrote a letter in which he summarized some of her responses to his questions.

She wrote for Joseph Smith during the work of translation, as did also Reuben Hale, her brother, and O. Cowdery; that the larger part of this labor was done in her presence, and where she could see and know what was being done; that during no part of it did Joseph Smith have any Mss. [manuscripts] or Book of any kind from which to read, or dictate, except the metalic plates, which she knew he had.  

Nor, incidentally, did Emma believe Joseph Smith capable of inventing the Book of Mormon and dictating it off the top of his head. “Joseph Smith . . . could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter,” her son’s notes report her as telling him, “let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon.”

Grant Hardy also seems to be skeptical. “The complexity” of the Book of Mormon, he writes,

is such that one would assume the author worked from charts and maps, though Joseph Smith’s wife—the person who had the longest and closest view of the production of the text—explicitly denied that he had written something out beforehand that he either had memorized or consulted as he translated, and indeed she claimed that Joseph began sessions of dictation without looking at the manuscript or having the last passage read back to him. (p. 7)

A correspondent from the *Chicago Times* interviewed David Whitmer on 14 October 1881 and received essentially the same account: “Mr. Whitmer emphatically asserts as did Harris and Cowdery, that while Smith was dictating the translation he had no manuscript notes
or other means of knowledge save the seer stone and the characters as shown on the plates, he being present and cognizant how it was done.”

Similarly, the *St. Louis Republican*, based upon an interview in mid-July of 1884, reported that “Father Whitmer, who was present very frequently during the writing of this manuscript [i.e., of the Book of Mormon], affirms that Joseph Smith had no book or manuscript before him from which he could have read as is asserted by some that he did, he (Whitmer) having every opportunity to know whether Smith had Solomon Spaulding’s or any other person’s romance to read from.”

David Whitmer repeatedly insisted that the translation process occurred in full view of Joseph Smith’s family and associates. It would appear, in fact, that the common image of a curtain hanging between the Prophet and his scribes, sometimes seen in illustrations of the story of the Book of Mormon, was not the usual *modus operandi*. There was indeed a curtain, at least in the latter stages of the translation process. However, that curtain was suspended not between the translator and his scribe but near the front door of the Peter Whitmer home, in order to prevent idle passersby and gawkers from interfering with the work.


21. Richard L. Bushman’s *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005) suggests, on pages 66 and 71, that, although it was not used later on, a curtain divided Martin Harris from Joseph Smith during the early period of translation, when Harris served as scribe. Secondhand reports seem to indicate that, for at least part of the time Harris acted as scribe, a blanket or curtain separated him from Joseph Smith and the plates. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:248 (*Palmyra Reflector*), 2:268 (John A. Clark), 2:285 (E. D. Howe), and 4:384 (Charles Anthon). See also Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” 63–64, who suggests that a curtain or blanket was present at the time Harris obtained a sample transcript and translation to take to Professor Anthon in New York City.

22. See Whitmer’s comments to the *Chicago Tribune*, 17 December 1885, as also the summary of an interview with him given in a February 1870 letter from William E. McLellin to some unidentified “dear friends” and the report published in the *Chicago
In order to give privacy to the proceeding a blanket, which served as a portiere, was stretched across the family living room to shelter the translators and the plates from the eye of any who might call at the house while the work was in progress. This, Mr. Whitmer says, was the only use made of the blanket, and it was not for the purpose of concealing the plates or the translator from the eyes of the amanuensis. In fact, Smith was at no time hidden from his collaborators, and the translation was performed in the presence of not only the persons mentioned, but of the entire Whitmer household and several of Smith’s relatives besides.23

On another occasion, Whitmer recalled, “I often sat by and heard them translate and write for hours together. Joseph never had a curtain drawn between him and his scribe while he was translating. He would place the director in his hat, and then place his face in his hat, so as to exclude the light, and then [read the words?] as they appeared before him.”24

It’s difficult, given such conditions, to explain the impressive number of intertextual allusions within the Book of Mormon. “Recurring expressions may simply be random,” says Grant Hardy,

but it is also possible to read some of them as intentional—that is, as allusions deliberately employed by the narrators, or alternatively, as ascribed to the narrators by a clever author. The problem with the latter option is that the degree of intricacy, while not unheard of in fiction, nevertheless seems incongruous with a book that was dictated as an extemporaneous oral composition. . . . Even when considered as a work of fiction, the inventiveness that seems apparent in Moroni’s use of allusion borders on the miraculous. (p. 247)

Further evidence that, whatever else was happening, Joseph Smith was not simply reading from a manuscript comes from an episode recounted

Times, 24 January 1888. The relevant passages are conveniently available in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 173, 233–34, 249.


by David Whitmer to William H. Kelley and G. A. Blakeslee in January 1882:

He could not translate unless he was humble and possessed the right feelings towards every one. To illustrate, so you can see. One morning when he was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went up stairs, and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation, but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went down stairs, out into the orchard and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, asked Emma’s forgiveness and then came up stairs where we were and the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful.25

Whitmer gave the same account to a correspondent for the *Omaha Herald* during an interview on 10 October 1886. The newspaper relates of the Prophet that

he went into the woods again to pray, and this time was gone fully an hour. His friends became positively concerned, and were about to institute a search, when Joseph entered the room, pale and haggard, having suffered a vigorous chastisement at the hands of the Lord. He went straight in humiliation to his wife, entreated and received her forgiveness, returned to his work, and, much to the joy of himself and his anxious friends surrounding him, the stone again glared forth its letters of fire.26

It would seem from this anecdote that Joseph needed to be in some way spiritually or emotionally ready for the translation process to proceed—something that would have been wholly unnecessary had he simply been

reading from a prepared manuscript. As David Whitmer explained, Joseph occasionally “found he was spiritually blind and could not translate. He told us that his mind dwelt too much on earthly things, and various causes would make him incapable of proceeding with the translation.”

At this point, of course, a skeptic might perhaps suggest that emotional distractions interfered with Joseph Smith’s ability to remember a text that he had memorized the night before for dictation to his naïve secretaries, or that personal upheavals hindered his improvising of an original text for them to write down as it occurred to him. But such potential counterexplanations run into their own serious difficulties: Whether it is even remotely plausible, for example, to imagine Joseph Smith or anyone else memorizing or composing nearly five thousand words daily, day after day, week after week, in the production of a lengthy and complex book is a question that readers can ponder for themselves. As someone who writes much and rapidly and who, having kept a daily record of how many words I produce each day over the past many years, has never come close to maintaining such a pace (even on a computer), I find the scenario—for anybody, to say nothing of the poorly educated Joseph Smith—extraordinarily implausible.

And so, it seems, does Grant Hardy. There are, he says, problems with reading the Book of Mormon as a novel. Under close scrutiny, it appears to be a carefully crafted, integrated work, with multiple narrative levels, an intricate organization, and extensive intratextual phrasal allusions and borrowings. None of this is foreign to fiction, but the circumstances of the book’s production are awkward: the more complicated and interconnected the text, the less likely it is that Joseph Smith made it up spontaneously as he dictated the words to his scribes, one time through. (p. xvii)


An anecdote recounted by Martin Harris to Edward Stevenson seems to argue against the translation process being either the simple dictation of a memorized text or the mechanical reading of an ordinary manuscript surreptitiously smuggled into the room. Harris is speaking about the earliest days of the work, before the arrival of Oliver Cowdery, when he was serving as scribe. Harris “said that the Prophet possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone.”

Now, obviously, the scribes needed light in order to be able to write the text down. By way of contrast (pun intended), Joseph seems to have needed to dim the ambient light so as to make the deliverances from the seer stone easier to see. Accordingly, the stone was placed in a hat into which the Prophet put his face. This situation, coupled with the lack of a dividing curtain, would obviously have made it very difficult, if not impossible, for Joseph to have concealed a manuscript, or books, or even the plates themselves. It would also have made it effectively impossible for him to read from a manuscript placed somehow at the bottom of the darkened hat. Stevenson’s account continues:

By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say, “Written,” and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used. Martin said, after continued translation they would become weary, and would go down to the river and exercise by throwing stones out on the river, etc. While so doing on one occasion, Martin found a stone very much resembling the one used for translating, and on resuming their labor of translation, Martin put in place the stone that he had found. He said that the Prophet remained silent, unusually and intently gazing in darkness, no traces of the usual sentences appearing. Much surprised, Joseph exclaimed, “Martin! What is

the matter? All is as dark as Egypt!” Martin’s countenance betrayed
him, and the Prophet asked Martin why he had done so. Martin
said, to stop the mouths of fools, who had told him that the Prophet
had learned those sentences and was merely repeating them.  

Furthermore, it is clear from careful analysis of the original manu-
script that Joseph did not know in advance what the text was going
to say. Chapter breaks and book divisions apparently surprised him.
He would see some indication, evidently, of a break in the text, and,
in each case, would tell his scribe to write “Chapter.” The numbers
were then added later. For instance, at what we now recognize as the
end of 1 Nephi, the original manuscript first indicates merely that a
new chapter is about to begin. (In the original chapter divisions, that
upcoming text was marked as “Chapter VIII.”) When Joseph and Ol-
iver subsequently discovered that they were instead at the opening of
a wholly distinct book, 2 Nephi, the chapter heading was crossed out
and a more appropriate heading was inserted. This is quite instructive.
It indicates that Joseph could only see the end of a section but did not
know whether the next section would be another portion of the same
book or, rather, the commencement of an entirely new book.

Here again, the historical facts that can be derived from close study
of the early manuscript evidence create a strong case for the authenticity
of Joseph Smith’s account of the nature of the Book of Mormon. Grant
Hardy points to a particular passage in the work of Moroni. “In terms
of the Book of Mormon’s internal chronology,” he writes,

Moroni at Ether 12 is quoting from documents in his possession:
the small plates of Nephi and a personal letter from his father. But
in light of the fact that Joseph Smith dictated the book of Ether
before either Moroni 9 or 2 Nephi 33 (itself dependent on 2 Ne. 3),

31. See Royal Skousen, ed., The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typo-
graphical Facsimile of the Extant Text (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 164; see also Skousen,
“Translating the Book of Mormon,” 85–86; and Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated
it may begin to strain credulity when we try to imagine Smith creating a narrator who makes specific allusions to several interrelated texts, none of which had yet been created. From the perspective of believers, it would be rather ironic if Moroni, who eschewed his father’s program of evidence-based faith, here inadvertently ended up providing perhaps the strongest textual validation for the historicity of the Book of Mormon. (p. 260)\[^{32}\]

If Joseph Smith didn’t know what was coming even a few pages ahead in the text of the Book of Mormon, it seems virtually impossible to imagine him as knowing details that were scores of chapters in the future.

Moreover, there were parts of the text that Joseph did not understand. “When he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words,” recalled his wife Emma of the earliest part of the translation, “he spelled them out.”\[^{33}\] And she evidently mentioned her experience to David Whitmer. “When Joseph could not pronounce the words,” Whitmer told Edmund C. Briggs and Rudolph Etzenhouser in 1884, “he spelled them out letter by letter.”\[^{34}\] Briggs also recalled an 1856 interview with Emma Smith in which “she remarked of her husband Joseph’s limited education while he was translating the Book of Mormon, and she was scribe at the time, ‘He could not pronounce the word Sariah.’ And one time while translating, where it speaks of the walls of Jerusalem, he stopped and said, ‘Emma, did Jerusalem have walls surrounding it?’ When I informed him it had, he replied, ‘O, I thought I

\[^{32}\] Hardy is fair and balanced, however, observing that, “Paradoxically, . . . with Ether 12’s clear and thorough dependence on Hebrews 6 and 11, Moroni has simultaneously supplied some of the most compelling evidence that the book has its origins in the nineteenth century” (p. 260).


\[^{34}\] Said in a 25 April 1884 interview with Edmund C. Briggs and Rudolph Etzenhouser, published in *Saints Herald* 31 (21 June 1884), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 128. By the time Joseph reached the portion of the Book of Mormon translation that is still extant in the original manuscript, there seems to be little if any evidence of such spelling out; see Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” 76–78.
was deceived.” As the Chicago Tribune summarized David Whitmer’s testimony in 1885, he confirmed Emma’s experience: “In translating the characters Smith, who was illiterate and but little versed in Biblical lore, was oftentimes compelled to spell the words out, not knowing the correct pronunciation, and Mr. Whitmer recalls the fact that at that time Smith did not even know that Jerusalem was a walled city.”

In its notice of the death of David Whitmer, and undoubtedly based upon its prior interviews with him, the 24 January 1888 issue of the Chicago Times again alluded to the difficulties Joseph had with the text he was dictating: “Smith being an illiterate, would often stumble over the big words, which the village schoolmaster [Oliver Cowdery] would pronounce for him, and so the work proceeded.”

Thus, the historical evidence strongly suggests that Joseph Smith was reading during the translation process from something external to himself, but also that he had no book or manuscript or paper with him. It seems to have been a text that was new and strange to him and one that required a certain emotional or mental focus before it could be read. All of this is entirely consistent with Joseph’s claim that he was deriving the text by revelation—“by the power of God”—through an interpreting device, but it does not seem reconcilable with claims that he had created

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35. In the Briggs and Etzenhouser interview, Saints Herald 31 (21 June 1884), as given in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 126–27. In a personal communication dated 18 August 2001, Royal Skousen suggests, plausibly enough, that Joseph probably kept pronouncing Sariah as Sarah.

36. Chicago Tribune, 17 December 1885, as given in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 174, emphasis in the original. Whitmer also mentioned the walls-of-Jerusalem incident in a conversation with M. J. Hubble on 13 November 1886, as given in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 211. The use of the term illiterate is potentially misleading here since Joseph Smith was literate, given the now-current meaning of the word. He could read and he could write. But Joseph was not a learned person; he was not a man of letters. Accordingly, in one sense of the word, he was illiterate. The use of literate in the sense of “learned” is found in the Oxford English Dictionary, under literate. One of the definitions of illiterate in the same dictionary reads: “ignorant of letters or literature; without book-learning or education; unlettered, unlearned.”

37. Chicago Times, 24 January 1888, as reproduced in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 249.
the text himself earlier, or even that he was merely reading from a purloined copy of someone else’s manuscript. In order to make the latter theories plausible, it is necessary to reject the unanimous testimony of the eyewitnesses to the process and to ignore the evidence provided by a careful examination and study of the original manuscript itself.

Conclusion

I believe that the historical data I’ve cited here, when combined with Grant Hardy’s analysis—which must be read in its richly detailed original; I’ve suggested only the barest outlines of a portion of his argument—suggests some important provisional conclusions regarding the nature of the Book of Mormon. The genuine options are few and quite straightforward: “The strong historical assertions of the book,” Hardy explains,

seem to allow for only three possible origins: as a miraculously translated historical document, as a fraud (perhaps a pious one) written by Joseph Smith, or as a delusion (perhaps sincerely believed) that originated in Smith’s subconscious. (p. 6)

The testimonies of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, though—including their accounts of substantial tangible objects involved—seem to render the idea of a purely subjective origin for the Book of Mormon in Joseph Smith’s mind extraordinarily difficult to sustain, if not utterly untenable. 38 And the complexity of the book, as that has been

exhibited in *Understanding the Book of Mormon* as well as a number of other publications over the past several decades, when combined with the nature and speed of its dictation (apparently without any written materials present as source documents), creates serious problems for the ever-popular hypothesis of simple fraud.

In *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Grant Hardy turns his highly trained eye on the historical writings of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni, examining them, for purposes of literary analysis, as separate personalities. This is the book’s unique contribution, and it, too, provides important evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon as a record not created by Joseph Smith or any other single author in the nineteenth century: The extraordinarily fruitful results of Hardy’s analysis demonstrate that their writings are indeed strikingly distinct, and that the three take very different approaches to their material.

Hardy cites three principles suggested as characteristic of biblical narrative by the Israeli literary critic and biblical scholar Meir Sternberg in his 1985 book *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*: historiographical, aesthetic, and ideological: “The three Book of Mormon narrators . . . balance these functions,” he says,

but they do so in distinctive ways. Mormon struggles the most with these competing agendas because he believes that history, fairly and objectively written, will provide an adequate demonstration of God’s providence and design. Yet that does not stop him from adding specific moral commentary or shaping narratives into aesthetically pleasing patterns when the facts themselves do not quite convey his points. Nephi and Moroni, by contrast, give less weight to history than they do to visions of the distant future (in the case of the former) or the witness of the Spirit (in the latter). (pp. 91–92)

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Much of the argument of *Understanding the Book of Mormon* boils down to the simple but momentous conclusion that “Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni are major characters themselves, and each has a distinctive life story, perspective, set of concerns, style, and sensibility” (p. xv). Hardy presents this as a very interesting literary finding, but, in my judgment, it virtually screams out a historical proposition as well. It seems obvious to me that the most reasonable interpretation of the evidence Hardy so carefully marshals is that Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni (and, I would add, the original Jaredite chronicler) are indeed distinct persons. Moreover, when, as Hardy also demonstrates, Mormon struggles to conform his historical data to his moralistic view of the past, that strongly suggests that Mormon was dealing with real, recalcitrant history, not fiction.\(^{39}\)

Grant Hardy set out, quite deliberately and explicitly, to write a nonapologetic book. And he did. Admirably well. But I don’t labor under his self-imposed neutrality, so I can be entirely open about my judgment of it: In *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Hardy has also written one of the very best books of Mormon apologetics ever published. By exhibiting the complexity of the Book of Mormon in a fresh and powerful way and establishing the distinct authorial personalities of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni, he has not only made an important literary point about the book but has thereby provided additional secular reason for treating its doctrinal and hortatory passages with seriousness and for crediting it as a genuine witness of the atonement and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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Comprehending the Book of Mormon through Its Editors

Jana Riess

Over a decade ago, a small religious publishing house invited me to write a brief commentary on the Book of Mormon for a series it had been producing on the sacred texts of the world’s religions.1 The Book of Mormon was to join the Dhammapada, the Zohar, the Bhagavad Gita, the Qur’an, and several other classic texts by this inclusion, so I was honored to be asked.

In the series, selections from each original sacred text would appear on the right side of each spread, with short annotations on the facing page, so that readers could get a taste of the original while gleaning small nuggets of information about the beliefs and practices of whatever religion upheld that text as sacred. One immediate problem for me was that the Book of Mormon needed to be condensed to approximately one-tenth of its actual length so that the volume could include my brief


explanations and would fit nicely on a shelf with all the other waifishly thin sacred texts that had been placed on similar diets. In my edits, the easiest (and most artistically satisfying) choice was the immediate deletion of every redundant “it came to pass” construction, but even this was not nearly enough to bring down the Book of Mormon’s profligate word count. So I made drastic cuts. The entire book of Ether wound up on the cutting room floor, for example, as did the Three Nephites, the stripling warriors, and most of Mormon’s edited history, with the exception of the coming of Christ.

All of this downsizing raised another, more serious, problem. The Book of Mormon is at its heart a story—an epic saga, to be more precise—and cutting out 90 percent of any saga is a project doomed from the start. What’s more, I realized even at the time that the quest was in peril for another reason: the Book of Mormon had already been edited, quite rigorously it would seem. In several places we learn that the original records from which the Book of Mormon was compiled were vast, as many as a hundred times more expansive than the small fraction that were passed down. The Book of Mormon as edited had already been winnowed considerably, the final product as truncated as its original editors had dared to make it.

I plowed ahead anyway, choosing only those parts of the Book of Mormon that would be most interesting to the series’ readers. Some of the most powerful theological passages remained, like 2 Nephi 2 and Alma 32, but in my efforts to encapsulate some of the beauty and wisdom of the Book of Mormon I wound up stripping it of context and character—which were among the most powerful things about it. The Book of Mormon is not a collection of pithy aphorisms to be dipped into at will, but a story. To eliminate the story is to eviscerate the book.

Or so Grant Hardy tried to gently communicate to me after I had sent him and his wife Heather my first attempts. I had met Hardy in 2003 when we were both part of an annual Book of Mormon Roundtable at Brigham Young University and was impressed by his knowledge of scripture and his keen sensitivity in interpreting the text. In our subsequent correspondence he read an early draft of my selections and
annotations and encouraged me to think more deeply about the text as a whole. “I would strongly urge you to use whole chapters rather than short quotations and snippets,” he wrote to me in late 2004. “And don’t reduce the Book of Mormon to just sermons; to do the book justice, you need to include some narrative as well.” As we continued to correspond he provided excellent feedback that made my book somewhat better, but still not something I was pleased with. I don’t think he was happy with it, either. He told me that as he read it he was aware on almost every other page of the things he would do differently if he were writing it.

Perhaps failed attempts like mine helped to catalyze Hardy to redouble his efforts on a project he had already started: a literary analysis of the Book of Mormon, the seed of what eventually became Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide. Up to that time, no one had approached the Book of Mormon in quite that way. We had seen a couple of worthy studies of the cultural history of the Book of Mormon, the best being Terryl Givens’s By the Hand of Mormon. And plenty of books had focused on proving or disproving the historicity of the Book of Mormon, an apologetic exercise Hardy wisely left alone. His task was instead that of a skilled literary exegete. He sought to uncover what the layers within the book itself could tell us about its characters, narrative agendas, and perhaps most importantly, its creators.

When I first read Understanding the Book of Mormon, I had the sense that here, in full flowering, was the fruit of the excellent advice Hardy had been trying to impart to me. Don’t chop the Book of Mormon up into parts, since the secret in its sauce are the leitmotifs that keep recurring through a thousand years of history. Don’t reduce the Book of Mormon to meme-able snippets of sermons or wisdom sayings. Do pay attention to narrative, to exposition and character and language. In sum, go deeper.

Five years after its initial publication, Hardy’s book still stands as my favorite study of the Book of Mormon. In part, that is likely because I make my living as a professional editor and have had to become attuned to the subtleties behind the scenes of any literary creation. I had never thought to apply those skills to the Book of Mormon, however—and
through Hardy’s writing I began to catch a glimpse of the richness I had missed. Hardy maintains that “it is through the narrators that we are most likely to ascertain the primary message of the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, the meaning of the text is neither unitary nor static. The editors/historians are portrayed as living, thinking individuals who develop as characters over the course of their writings” (p. 213).

This notion that the creators of the Book of Mormon were living thinkers who changed over time may seem obvious, but only because Hardy has made it so. He is the first scholar to pay sustained, detailed literary attention to the fact that the Book of Mormon was narrated by three very different people over a significant period of history. He wants readers to understand these narrators’ equally different personalities and agendas. Nephi, fascinated by prophecy and his own role in its fulfillment, employed narrative techniques to privilege his own position by flattening the characters of his brothers, Laman and Lemuel (who, if we read between the lines as Hardy encourages us to do, sometimes come across as more caring and understandable than Nephi himself). Nephi’s theological concerns weren’t shared by the next major narrator, Mormon, who was neither a visionary nor a theologian. Whereas Nephi reread the Bible, particularly Isaiah, with his own situation in mind, Mormon saw himself as a historian and a moral guide (“thus we see”), leaving scriptural interpretation and apocalypticism to others. The tragedy of Mormon’s death contributed to the editorial concerns of his son, Moroni, a reticent author who created his slight record over the course of thirty-six lonely years and focused more on the lost civilization of the Jaredites than on his own lost civilization of the Nephites, of whom he was a lone survivor.

Three editors, three very different emphases. But because no one else had ever so eloquently teased out these differences in personality and preoccupations before, the individual specificity of each contributor had gone unheralded before Hardy’s book. Hardy understands the complex literary process of writing and editing a book, and he extrapolates

from that scenario how much more complex it all would be if the writers and editors were actually the same people, as with the Book of Mormon. He also asks us to remember, as we study, how the creation of this literary work would become still more complex if its perceived audience were not the authors’ contemporaries, but unseen readers many centuries in the future.

An editor’s role is powerful but largely unseen. As William Shawn, the former editor of the New Yorker, once put it, “The work of a good editor, like the work of a good teacher, does not reveal itself directly; it is reflected in the accomplishments of others.” Yet the boundary separating author and editor is unusually porous in the Book of Mormon, in which editors are also authors, piecing together primary sources and adding commentary on existing narratives. Rather than fading into the background, these editors are right out in front, their names titling the books they have quilted. For readers, this adds another level of complexity to interpreting the Book of Mormon, a complexity that Hardy observes in valuable detail.

Hardy’s book investigates the underside of the Book of Mormon quilt, the backstage processes we won’t notice unless we specifically go looking for them. And once we’ve seen the complexity of the parts, we can never underestimate the finished product in quite the same way again. Why include those particular primary sources? Why these letters and embedded documents, and not others? With Mormon, for example, Hardy notes that “the regular interplay between embedded documents and narrative paraphrase makes the Book of Mormon more than just a compilation of primary sources; it shows Mormon as a thoughtful, engaged editor who is consciously responding to and adapting the material at hand” (pp. 147–48). How he incorporated primary sources—and how he structured his own narrative—reveal much about Mormon’s anxieties and hopes.

Throughout Understanding, Hardy is conscious of not only what the text says, but how it is arranged, which can sometimes reveal internal tensions. He notices, for example, the strange way that Mormon situates Alma’s instructions to his sons. I had certainly never thought to question
this order. Mormon inserts these instructions right in the middle of the Zoramite War that began in Alma 31 and 32. The overarching narrative about the war does not pick up again until Alma 43. Hardy suggests that Mormon conceived of this somewhat awkward placement on purpose, deliberately disrupting the chronological narrative in order to avoid readers making the connection that it was Alma’s preaching that may have started the war in the first place (pp. 149, 272). Sometimes, it is an editor’s job to hide an author’s vulnerabilities.

It is also part of an editor’s job to stand in as an advocate for the reader. In the writing of the book an author can sometimes get so wrapped up in the narrative and in the details that he or she loses sight of the end result: the reader’s enjoyment, edification, or even transformation. Editors have to remind authors often about what the reader knows and when the reader knows it. In a story, you don’t want to reveal too much too soon, but neither do you wish to burden the reader with so many details that the narrative suspense is lost. In nonfiction, similarly, an editor must remain vigilant about building gradually upon the knowledge the reader already has, challenging some assumptions while reinforcing others.

One gift that Grant Hardy has given us is a thorough scrutiny of the way that the Book of Mormon editors are hyperconscious of their audience in the distant future. In Mormon’s case, in fact, this prophetic role represents a serious departure from his usual approach. Mormon’s own tendency to relay facts and dates and specifics is derailed, suddenly, by a prophetic call (3 Nephi 26:11–12). With this, Hardy points out, “Mormon’s message and agenda are no longer of his own design; instead, he is speaking for God, as prophets do.” Mormon “appears somewhat reluctant to assume this new role,” since it means that “he is editing against his own best judgment about how to meet his long-standing objectives” (p. 208). Hardy is careful to note some specific instances where this move from historian to prophet may have been frustrating for Mormon, as when “the Lord forbade” him to reveal the identity of the Three Nephites, to whom he may have had direct access (the historian’s equivalent of a Golden Contact). Instead of recounting that
all-important crucible of Nephite history, he was commanded to focus on the prophetic future, not the past (pp. 210–11).

Sometimes, Hardy posits that what an author-cum-editor says in the Book of Mormon and what he does can be quite different. For example, what Mormon says about the controversial character of Captain Moroni is that he was a man of “perfect understanding” who sets an example for us all to emulate (Alma 48). He is described in Mormon’s words as “firm in the faith of Christ,” a person of deep religious conviction. Yet as Hardy points out, the primary sources Mormon chooses to include show Captain Moroni to be quick to anger and slow to pray—he is never portrayed praying or appealing to God. Moreover, this man that Mormon tells us “did not delight in bloodshed” may have been more brutal than necessary in warfare. By including these sources, it’s possible that Mormon is offering subtle criticism of Captain Moroni, a reproach that a lesser interpreter than Hardy would almost certainly pass over.

Hardy is also a sensitive observer of character. When I first read the Book of Mormon in my twenties, I had a difficult time relating to Nephi, the crucial first narrator of the Book of Mormon. Nephi often comes across as self-important and preoccupied with his place in history. He caricatures his older brothers, the comical complainers Laman and Lemuel, who almost never appear as individual actors in his narrative. They are stock characters straight out of central casting.

It was years later when my opinion of Nephi began to change, and it was when I was exposed to Hardy’s work on the context for the Psalm of Nephi (2 Nephi 4), which shows Nephi as something of a tragic figure. Nephi had been privileged to look into the future—how many of us have not wished for that, to see how the story will end?—but such foreknowledge was a curse when he saw that his brothers’ descendants would be the ruin of his own people. Bearing that knowledge, he still had to live in the world, to love and work and raise children, to try to preserve the record of his people. And he had to engage in the uphill theological battle of trying to understand how a loving God would let the coming destruction happen.
In that context, the Psalm of Nephi suddenly became hard-hittingly personal. Why, Nephi asked, should his heart weep, his soul linger in sorrow, his flesh waste away, and his strength slacken when he knew he had seen great things and experienced God’s mercy? Why, indeed? Suddenly, I could begin to relate.

As Hardy masterfully pried Nephi’s character from between the lines of the reticent text, I began to give Nephi a second chance. His failures, rather than his many successes, won my heart. As Hardy points out, “Nephi’s life was one of general disappointment” (p. 70). In fact, the self-importance that I once found so grating about Nephi’s account now strikes me as a very human attempt to make sense of that overall disappointment. Nephi never tells us much about the family he created on his own as an adult, focusing instead on the crucial fault line that developed between himself and his elder brothers. But knowing that Nephi had sons and yet chose to pass the records to his brother Jacob instead suggests the presence of a shadow story, one that only a careful interpreter like Hardy would think to wonder about.

As Hardy puts it, “Through his literary efforts, his failures among his own family would be redeemed by the lasting impact of his book, and his life would be justified” (p. 75). This is the Nephi I have come to respect, even to enjoy: the one whose spiritual insights were not facile but hard-won, the products of pain.

In the end, Hardy’s literary analysis is also theology. By making a close study of the complexity of the Book of Mormon (and, by extension, its creators), he is also teaching us new ways to imagine God. Subtle changes of language—even of tenses and pronouns—may be trying to teach us something significant. For example, reading carefully in the narration of Mormon, Hardy notices that although Mormon’s writings focus almost solely on individual salvation, “sinners who exercise faith in [Christ] can repent, accept baptism, and be forgiven through the effects of his sacrificial atonement, eventually being resurrected and pronounced clean at the final judgment.” But what Mormon chooses to present to us about Jesus focuses on a bigger picture: the covenant with Israel (p. 205). Mormon’s Jesus wants to save an entire people, not
just individuals. Hardy’s exceptionally close reading of what Mormon has taught up to that point in 3 Nephi enables the contrast to be made here when Christ arrives and speaks for himself.

*Understanding the Book of Mormon* has raised the bar for everyone in Book of Mormon studies—indeed, for everyone who wants to take the Book of Mormon seriously. By tracing patterns and themes throughout the work as a whole, Hardy succeeds in accomplishing what he says at the end that he set out to do from the beginning. In the words of Robert Alter, he has offered us “a continuous reading of the text instead of a nervous hovering over its various small components.” I am glad, and grateful, that Grant Hardy has succeeded so brilliantly at achieving Alter’s standard of holistic interpretation where many others and I have failed.

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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.

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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.

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.” 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

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

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

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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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A View from the Outside—An Appreciative Engagement with Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*

*John Christopher Thomas*

It is indeed an honor for me to be invited to participate in this special issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* devoted to conversations around and with Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*. This monograph is certainly worthy of such honor and is, in my opinion, one of the most significant works devoted to the Book of Mormon, having already had a major impact on the discipline of Book of Mormon studies and beyond. My own contribution to this conversation will take the form of autobiographical reflections that move to an engagement with the book itself. In this way I hope to honor the book and its author, while perhaps pushing the discussion a bit further along the way.

A testimony

My initial encounter with the Book of Mormon came in January 1974 as a result of a visit to Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah. The college touring choir of which I was a member was in the midst of a trip across the United States, from Cleveland, Tennessee, to California and back again. Having visited the impressive Tabernacle, complete with a
demonstration of its acoustic sophistication, we stopped by the Visitors’ Center before continuing on our journey, where several of us received a complimentary copy of the Book of Mormon, the one with the iconic light blue cover. Little did I know that the reception of this copy would be the first of numerous encounters with Mormonism and its distinctive book over the next four decades.

The next few years would be marked by my becoming acquainted with Mormonism through extended conversations with Mormon missionaries (some of whose names I still can recall), non-Mormon literature responding to Mormon claims, a graduate course on Mormon history from its beginnings through the events of Nauvoo, the visiting of various historic Mormon sites, extensive reading of a variety of studies devoted to Mormonism(s) more generally and the Book of Mormon more specifically by authors both friendly and unfriendly to its claims, and a graduate level reading course on the Book of Mormon itself. But, I am getting ahead of myself . . .

It was during my last study leave during the summer and autumn terms of 2013, the year before I turned sixty, that I decided to undertake an extensive—formal—study of the Book of Mormon, in addition to the other research projects for which in part I was granted the study leave by the Pentecostal Theological Seminary—projects that I completed, by the way. Perhaps it was approaching my sixtieth year that prompted me to move from informal, occasional study of the book to a more formal and structured one—to close a personal loop if you will. So, having located a theological seminary within the restorationist tradition—the Community of Christ Seminary in Independence, Missouri—and having gained admission as a student, I began to work my way through the extensive reading list of monographs. During this period, before I made the trip to campus for a week of interaction with my tutor, two unexpected things happened to me. First, despite the plethora of studies devoted to the Book of Mormon, I was disappointed to learn that few of them addressed many of the questions (at least under one cover) that I brought to this text, for most of the works, whatever the topic or method, seemed primarily interested in whether or not the Book
of Mormon is historically true or false, verifiable or not—certainly an important issue but not the only issue, nor was it the one in which I was most interested. Oddly, to me, even some works devoted to literary approaches wound up being forced into the service of this evidentialist apologetic, an approach I must admit that I have very little interest in, even among biblical scholars seeking to defend this or that point. My own interests are primarily literary and theological, with extensive interests in reception history. Second, it was during this period that I became aware of what I was being called to do. I should perhaps note that during the course of my academic life I have felt a spiritual calling to every major research project that I have undertaken, and surprisingly, I felt I was being called to write a short introduction to the Book of Mormon that addressed the many issues that I, as one trained in biblical studies and an outsider, brought to the text. Specifically, I was interested in the book’s structure, content, theology, reception history, and putting the book into conversation with my own Pentecostal tradition, before taking up any issues related to origins, especially given its contentious and overrepresented place in the literature available to me. As the reader may have guessed by now, it was somewhere during this period of reading and exploration that I first encountered Grant’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. Its appeal was immediate and I found it extraordinarily helpful and inviting.

**Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon*—significance and scope**

In a nutshell, Grant’s book sounds the right note from the beginning by acknowledging the fact that so long as Book of Mormon studies begin with the question of Joseph Smith’s role in its coming forth, there will be little for insiders and outsiders to converse about, aside from trying to convince one another to change sides (p. xvi).\(^1\) In point of fact, Grant

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goes so far as to say that so long as Joseph Smith is the starting point, “Mormons and non-Mormons will never agree on the basic nature of the text” (p. xvi). He summarizes his proposed approach nicely in one helpful paragraph.

Someone, somewhere, made choices about how the narrative of the Book of Mormon was to be constructed. We can look closely at the text—how it is arranged, how it uses language, how it portrays itself, how it conveys its main points—without worrying too much about whether the mind ultimately responsible for such decisions was that of Mormon or Joseph Smith. So I propose bracketing, at least temporarily, questions of historicity in favor of a detailed examination of what the Book of Mormon is and how it operates. In the chapters that follow I will outline the major features of the book and illustrate some of the literary strategies employed by the narrators. It does not matter much to my approach whether these narrators were actual historical figures or whether they were fictional characters created by Joseph Smith; their role in the narrative is the same in either case. After all, narrative is a mode of communication employed by both historians and novelists. (p. xvi)

Later, Grant clarifies even further, “Rather than making a case for Smith’s prophetic claims, I want to demonstrate a mode of literary analysis by which all readers, regardless of their prior religious commitments or lack thereof, can discuss the book in useful and accurate ways” (p. xvii).

As one for whom the Book of Mormon does not function as scripture, I find that both of Grant’s judgments are reasonable if not compelling. His assessment of the current impasse that exists between many insiders and outsiders exhibits an honesty and sensitivity that does not always find a place in such academic conversations about the Book of Mormon. Such a judgment seems bang on the mark to me. At the same time, his judgment with regard to proposing a methodology with which members of both groups could feel comfortable—an inclusive method if you will—is itself bold and eminently insightful. By focusing on the literary and theological aspects of the narrative itself, the proposal dovetails nicely with a methodological move that has swept across a variety
of academic disciplines, meaning that it is methodologically at home with inquiries in a broad set of disciplines. It is also a methodological approach that treats texts, especially religious texts, with the kind of sensitivity they deserve by examining what the texts themselves say rather than explaining them (away) by means of a historical critical approach. Another benefit, which is not always fully appreciated, is that this methodological approach can produce results that are often much more accessible to everyday readers than is sometimes the case with the utilization of certain other methodological approaches.

Specifically, Grant is interested in what can be known of the three primary narrators he identifies (Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni) and their work as found in the book, arguing that both believer and skeptic can learn from what can be known of their literary function. Thus, after the first chapter (“A Brief Overview: Narrator-based Reading”), he devotes part 1 to Nephi (“Sons and Brothers: Characterization” and “Prophets of Old: Scriptural Interpretation”), part 2 to Mormon (“Mormon’s Dilemma: Competing Agendas,” “Other Voices: Embedded Documents,” “ Providential Recurrence: Parallel Narratives,” and “The Day of the Lord’s Coming: Prophecy and Fulfillment”), and part 3 to Moroni (“Weakness in Writing: A Sense of Audience” and “Strategies of Conclusion: Allusion”), rounding out his study with an afterword.

The monograph is very well written and quite user friendly. Throughout, Grant maintains an irenic tone while grappling with the implications of his analysis for those who hold the book to be scripture and those who do not. He almost always accomplishes his goals. His tone and honesty make the book a pleasure to read and ensure that the literary interpretation(s) he sets forth will receive a sympathetic hearing and response, whether or not one agrees with his conclusions and faith claims. Not content with offering literary soundings that are ultimately forced into the service of determining issues of origins or using his analysis as an opportunity to offer any number of devotional insights about the book, Grant keeps a sharp focus on his literary and theological objectives. In the process, he produces a monograph that not only brings numerous, heretofore-unnoticed dimensions of the text
to light but also generates a seismic shift in the terrain of the academic study of this book. It would seem that the discipline of Book of Mormon studies has been significantly altered by Grant’s work and that as a result such literary dimensions of the text can no longer be ignored in serious engagements with the Book of Mormon.

By this point it should be obvious to readers that I appreciate greatly and have enormous esteem for this work and its author. In a volume devoted to conversations about the book and its significance, one way to proceed would be to identify the numerous individual original contributions Grant makes in this volume. While such an assessment would in and of itself be a worthwhile contribution to the history of Book of Mormon research, unfortunately, such a deserved response would take more space than the generous allocations afforded to the individual essays in this special issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. My suspicions are that most serious readers in the area of Book of Mormon studies are themselves already familiar with many of these contributions and that there are others much better equipped than myself to make such an assessment. Another approach, which is all too common in the book review genre, would be to enter into a critical assessment of the volume, setting out all the places where one disagrees with this or that judgment set forth by the author, all the while demonstrating the obvious intellectual superiority of the reviewer when compared to the author. But I have neither the inclination nor the energies to participate in such a counterproductive enterprise. For it seems to me that in pioneering works like this one, readers (and reviewers) are much better served by entering into the narrative world of the book under consideration, reading with the grain whenever possible rather than against it, not looking for points of disagreement but reflecting on the questions raised for the reader by the reading experience itself.

Rather than following either of the afore mentioned approaches, what I would like to do in the rest of this short celebration piece is to think out loud with Grant (and any others who might be interested in listening in), sharing a few thoughts that occurred to me during my reading of his fine book. Specifically, I would like to compare notes with
Grant about the way certain dimensions of the Book of Mormon appear a bit differently when approached from a slightly differently calibrated literary approach.

Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon*—thinking out loud with Grant

So to begin . . . It did not take long for me to discern, as I made my way through Grant’s very helpful monograph, that what I was experiencing was more of a redaction critical analysis of the Book of Mormon than the kind of narrative analysis with which I was accustomed as one trained in biblical studies. While it is clear that Grant makes constant use of many of the tools of narrative analysis in his *Understanding*, with much profit, he early on gives his readers a hint to the somewhat hybrid nature of his approach when noting that he treats the book as “a ‘history-like’ narrative,” though stopping “short of actual historical criticism” (p. 26). By this statement I took him to mean that he was limiting himself to information provided in the narrative alone, a standard notion in narrative criticism. What I came to understand this statement to mean is that he saw the book’s history-like narrative as calling for an interaction with the text in a more redactional way than a traditional narrative engagement with the book, though he does not use the language of redaction criticism. It is this perceived distinction and its implications for a reading of the Book of Mormon that I want to think out loud about here. Of course, such fine distinctions might be thought by some to be just so much methodological hairsplitting. But I hope to tease out the significance of these slightly different methodological approaches for a study of the Book of Mormon by means of three issues that might illustrate my point and thereby honor Grant’s work through this rather narrowly focused engagement with it in the meantime.

*Structure*

The first issue that made me wonder how an exploration from a more traditional narrative analysis perspective might look differently from
Grant’s work concerned the structure of the Book of Mormon. Grant seemed to give two clues about the book’s structure. The first is his straightforward identification of the book’s basic structure (p. 10) as:

- Small Plates of Nephi—1 Nephi through Omni (150 pages)
- Mormon’s explanatory comments—Words of Mormon (2 pages)
- Mormon’s abridgment of the Large Plates of Nephi—Mosiah through ch. 7 of Mormon (380 pages)
- Moroni’s additions to his father’s records—ch. 8 of Mormon through Moroni (50 pages)

The second hint as to his view of structure is the way in which he arranges his own book based on this broad structure of the Book of Mormon. Based on its structure (and his own detailed readings of the book as a whole), Grant identifies the three primary narrators (Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni) around which he organizes the three main parts (and their constituent chapters) of his work. Of course, such an arrangement is helpful in various ways and contributes to a reader’s sense of finding one’s way through the Book of Mormon, especially if one is new to the book. But as helpful as all of this was to me personally, I found myself wondering what structure would emerge from the book if one examined it less as a history-like narrative that focused on the history of the individual narrators and a bit more on the literary function of these characters—as well as on other structural literary markers in the narrative. What I saw in the text seemed to confirm my suspicions about this matter.

A close examination of the Book of Mormon reveals that the macro-structure of the narrative takes shape around the central writers/editors, Mormon and Moroni, as their names occur in strategic locations throughout the book. For example, both names appear on the title page, where the Book of Mormon is described as “an account written by the hand of Mormon, upon the plates taken from the plates of Nephi” and as “sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by way of Gentile.”<sup>2</sup> Such prominence leads the readers to expect

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<sup>2</sup> Book of Mormon quotations reflect the 1830 text with LDS versification.
that both figures will have more than passing significance in the pages to follow.

Such expectancy is not disappointed, for after the first six books (that come from the small plates of Nephi), covering some 146 pages in the 1830 edition, an entire book is devoted to the words of Mormon. In these words the readers once again find reference to Moroni as well:

And now I, Mormon, being about to deliver up the record which I have been making, into the hands of my son Moroni, behold, I have witnessed almost all the destruction of my people, the Nephites. And it is many hundred years after the coming of Christ, that I deliver these records into the hands of my son. (Words of Mormon 1:1–2)

Whereas the preceding narrative (1 Nephi–Omni) has given the impression of chronological movement from the narrative’s beginning—devoted to Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem before its destruction by the Babylonians, down to the events associated with Amaleki—the Words of Mormon breaks this narrative development, jumping ahead many hundreds of years after the coming of Christ. In point of fact, Mormon’s words come from the perspective of the book’s anticipated end, which includes the complete destruction of the Nephite people. This perspective lends a certain credibility to Mormon’s words for the readers, for he apparently knows his people’s entire history from beginning to end. Mormon goes on to locate his readers within his own editorial reflections. At this point he looks back on his work from the plates of Nephi and his locating additional plates containing a “small account of the Prophets, from Jacob, down to the reign of this king Benjamin” (Words of Mormon 1:3). But he also gives the readers an orientation as to what lies ahead. Much of the rest of Mormon’s work will come from the abridgment of other plates of Nephi. Thus, Mormon speaks authoritatively to the readers about their location or progress within the broader narrative. He also provides a transition with regard to the account of King Benjamin, who was introduced near the end of the book immediately preceding the Words of Mormon (Omni 1:23) and
who is taken back up in the book that immediately follows the Words of Mormon (Mosiah 1:1–6:5).

Mormon makes another appearance within the broader narrative in 3 Nephi 5:10–20, where he steps out of the narrative with claims that he has made a record on plates from the plates of Nephi, that he is “a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” that his small record runs from the time Lehi left Jerusalem “even down until the present time,” that his record is “just and true,” and that he is a true descendant of Lehi. With these words, Mormon reassures his readers of the trustworthiness of his account for it includes “things which I have seen with mine own eyes.” Mormon reappears near the end of 3 Nephi (26:8–13),³ where he again underscores his role in the writing of these records specifically with regard to the words and actions of Jesus in his appearance to those in the Americas. Here Mormon makes clear that he recorded only those things not forbidden by the Lord to be recorded. In 4 Nephi 1:23 Mormon briefly reappears, presumably as a guarantor who testifies of the way in which the people multiplied, became exceedingly rich, and prospered in Christ.

As the story of the Nephites and Lamanites draws to a conclusion, Mormon and Moroni once again figure prominently, this time in a book that bears the name of the former. Mormon begins this book by once again emphasizing his role as eyewitness to many of the things he records and telling the readers something of his call to this task. When Mormon was ten years old, Ammaron, who himself had become the guardian of the sacred records (4 Nephi 1:48–49), recognized that Mormon was a “sober child, and . . . quick to observe” (Mormon 1:2) and instructed him that when he was twenty-four years old he should go to the land Antum, to a hill called Shim, and retrieve the plates of Nephi and engrave on them all the things he had observed about his people (see 1:3–4). At the age of fifteen, Mormon writes, he was visited of the Lord (1:15) and, owing to the boy’s stature, was made the leader of the Nephites in their ongoing struggle against the Lamanites (2:1).

³ Actually, the words of Mormon mark the conclusion of each major section of 3 Nephi at 5:10–20, 10:11–19, 26:8–13, and 28:13–30:2.
While fighting near the location of the hidden plates of Nephi, Mormon retrieved the plates and made a full record of all the wickedness and abominations according to the instructions he had received from Ammaron (2:17–18). As the fighting intensified, Mormon went back to the hill Shim and retrieved all the plates Ammaron hid there (4:23). As he grew old, Mormon hid all the plates, save the few he entrusted to his son Moroni (6:6), who led the Nephite army (6:12). Upon the death of Mormon at the hands of the Lamanites, Moroni writes in his father’s stead (8:1) and purposes to hide the records in the earth (8:4), a promise on which he is said to make good (8:14), pronouncing a blessing on whoever brings them to light (8:16).

But before the solitary Moroni completes his task, he gives an account of the Jaredites in the book of Ether taken from the twenty-four plates found by the people of Limhi (Ether 1:1–6). In his abbreviated account, Moroni recounts the history of this people who came to the Americas at the time of the events surrounding the Tower of Babel.

Finally, while attempting to avoid death at the hands of the Lamanites, Moroni offers his final words and (the final words of the entire Book of Mormon) in the book that bears his name. After recording instructions on a variety of ecclesiological matters (Moroni 1:1–6:9), Moroni and Mormon stand together at the conclusion of the entire Book of Mormon. Here Moroni includes additional words from his father (Moroni 7), as well as two epistles from Mormon to Moroni (Moroni 8 and 9). And as death draws near for Moroni, he bids farewell with an expectation of resurrection (Moroni 10:34).

It is difficult to underestimate the structural significance of Mormon and Moroni for the book, for not only do they appear together as an inclusio around the entire narrative, but they also appear (often together) at a variety of strategic locations throughout, orienting the readers as to their own location in the broader composition, apprising them of the specific plates and records being relied upon, and assuring the readers of the trustworthiness of the accounts. In each case it seems that Mormon, Moroni, or both, appear when the narrative introduces a new set of plates from which the record is drawn. Thus, standing at the beginning (the
title page), at the end of the small plates of Nephi, at the end of the large plates of Nephi, and on either side of the plates found by the people of Limhi, Mormon and/or Moroni appear as structural markers for the readers, providing recognizable landmarks to guide them.

Whether or not Nephi rises to a structural level comparable to Mormon and Moroni in the Book of Mormon, as Grant’s work seems to imply, is not altogether clear. On the one hand, reference to Nephi also appears on the title page—which could be teased out further with regard to structural implications—and his narration in 1 and 2 Nephi is unquestionably foundational for the narrative that follows. On the other hand, his “voice” does not continue to be heard in quite the same way as do those of Mormon and Moroni, whether in terms of unambiguous references—though echoes continue—or in terms of reassuring the readers as to their location within the unfolding narrative.

Reading backward or forward

Another aspect of my reading experience that gave me pause as to how a particular issue would look from a more traditional narrative analysis was the way in which Grant presents all the book’s information about Mormon long before the reader actually encounters the information. Already on the fourth page of the 125-page part devoted to Mormon, Grant reveals that his reading “is not as subtle as the Book of Mormon, so we will work backward starting from Mormon’s autobiography” (p. 92). As a result, the reader is given a synopsis of most of the information about Mormon that the Book of Mormon contains. Such an approach is consistent with his view of the Book of Mormon as a history-like narrative, in that he treats the contents as history-like material from which a history-like image of its characters, especially its narrators, might be constructed or, more optimistically, reconstructed. Such an interpretive strategy is in keeping with that of a variety of redactional analyses well known in the biblical studies guild.

However, such an approach complicates the narrative reader’s reading experience where the implied reader (that is, the reader implied by the text) is constructed by the implied author (that is, the author
implied by the text) as the narrative journey unfolds. In other words, rather than being given all the biographical information that the reader will learn about Mormon up front, a more straightforward narrative analysis might reveal more about how Mormon’s function within the world of the story forms the reader in various ways. If the reader only learns information about Mormon when the narrative itself reveals it, the reader has a much different experience than having a historical knowledge about Mormon provided up front. Rather, the reader develops a relationship with Mormon—albeit a literary one—as he or she makes the various interpretive moves that Mormon facilitates and the reader begins to form opinions as to Mormon’s trustworthiness, prophetic knowledge, spirituality, reliability, and judgments. In other words, the reader not only comes to know Nephite and Lamanite history under his tutelage, but also comes to share Mormon’s viewpoint as the reader shares this editor’s excruciating experiences. In this way, Mormon’s war-worn admonitions communicate at a deeper level than knowledge about his role or history-like life, for by the end of the volume the implied reader experiences Mormon’s anguished exhortations for faithfulness, belief, and righteous living as heartfelt pleas that are rooted and grounded in his own experience, an experience shared narratively by the readers as the story (and Mormon’s role in it) unfolds bit by bit through the pages of the book. Thus, the despair exhibited by Mormon—and Moroni, for that matter—at the end of the narrative serves to form the reader at both cognitive and emotional, perhaps even affective, levels. Therefore, in the end, the tragedy that is the Book of Mormon is felt sympathetically, if not empathetically, by the reader who has been influenced in large part by its editors’ locations and words in the narrative world of the text.

*To imagine or not to imagine—that is the question*

A third aspect of my reading experience that made me wonder about how differently a particular issue would look from a more traditional narrative analysis has to do with those occasions when some of Grant’s historical judgments seem to go beyond narrative characterization. For the purposes of illustration, I will focus on his analysis of Nephi.
As with his decision to treat the Book of Mormon as a history-like narrative, so in the case of his use of characterization, Grant makes a conscious decision that he believes best fits the genre and narrative of the book. Citing a variety of literary theorists in support of his approach (pp. 23–25), he seems to make a conscious decision to push beyond what in biblical studies is normally thought to be the limits of characterization, while stopping short of historical criticism itself. The rationale for this phenomenon is set forth rather early on when Grant acknowledges:

At times I imagine what sorts of life experiences might have resulted in the narration as it is presented, but only insofar as there is at least indirect textual support. I do not, for instance, ask questions about Nephi’s favorite foods or how old Mormon was when he married. Readers are free, of course, to ask anything they want, but since these speculations are entirely outside the text and its thematic concerns, they are not arguable assertions. On the other hand, in the next chapter I will suggest that Nephi’s narration is more coherent if we imagine that he had no sons, and I identify verses that seem to support this hypothesis. I am not, however, making a claim about a historical Nephi; I am trying to make sense of a text. There may be other readings that connect data in different ways to provide a better explanation for why Nephi tells his story the way he does, but because this is something we can argue about, based on textual evidence, there is some truth-value to my proposition regardless of whether Nephi was a historical figure or a fictional construct. Although it may sometimes appear as if my analysis assumes the historicity of the text, the sorts of observations and inferences I put forward could just as readily be made about an intricately constructed, multivocal, narrated novel such as Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (pp. 25–26).

One of the places where the results of such an approach become clear is in his discussion of Nephi’s narration of his brothers Laman and Lemuel as “stock characters, even caricatures” (pp. 32–33). Grant describes Nephi’s brother Sam as “bland to the point of being nearly a nonentity,” not a discernible presence during family conflicts, never uttering a single word in the book. At issue for Grant seems to be the
desire to discern why Nephi writes as he does, tells the story in the way he does. In other words, it appears that Grant wants to get inside the mind of the character Nephi based on details in the text. It should be noted that at times his detective work seems to have textual standing when, for example, he lays out all the reasons why he suspects that Nephi has no sons among his children.

But such a pursuit raised various issues for me as an interpreter. First, it struck me as a bit ironic that in a narrative analysis of the book, a method that in part was developed by readers who have given up as impossible the idea of entering into the actual/real author’s head, that Grant would seem to pursue such a goal on the literary level. Second, in some ways it seems to me that what Grant does in his quest for uncovering editorial motives is to read against the grain of the narrative. Such a methodological approach, of course, has its place and can yield helpful results, but it appears to be more at home with a methodology of deconstruction than narrative analysis. Third, it seemed to me that the kind of imaginative characterization that Grant pursues at various points in the monograph makes more sense for those who view the Book of Mormon as a historical record than for those who do not. Those who view the book as a historical record might well be concerned about Nephi’s motivation to write as he does and present the individual characters in the ways he does, but those interested exclusively in what the narrative provides or conveys would not likely think such is possible given the limitations of the narrative. Fourth, to go further and talk about what might have been omitted by the narrator—Nephi in this case—seems to assume more than the narrative reveals and might be a weight that is too heavy for the narrative to bear. I do not mean any of these thoughts as a criticism of Grant’s efforts or results, for he successfully employs the method he describes and utilizes. But in my understanding of narrative as utilized in biblical studies, the move to explain motivation and possible backgrounds seems to go beyond the method’s intent. Rather, it would seem that a narrative approach would focus much more on the “that-ness” of the text rather than on the motive of characters in the text, unless, of course, they are laid out as such.
At any rate, I wondered how the characterization of Nephi and his brothers might differ in a more traditional narrative analysis with its rather modest goals for characterization. Perhaps a brief overview of 1 Nephi will illustrate what a basic, more narrowly defined narrative analysis would generate with regard to the basic characterization of individuals in 1 Nephi. So—to a brief reading of 1 Nephi.

Owing to a significant structural marker in the text of 1 Nephi, it appears that the book falls into three major parts, each of which concludes with the phrase “And thus it is. Amen” (1 Nephi 9:6; 14:30; and 22:31). Based on the strategic locations of this phrase, a tripartite structure, consisting of the following blocks of text, emerges:

Part 1. Lehi and his sons (1:1–9:6)
Part 2. Nephi becomes a spirit-empowered spokesperson (10:1–14:30)

When the contents of part 1 (1 Nephi 1:1–9:6) are examined in narrative order, the readers would likely be impressed by the amount of space devoted to the records or plates associated with Nephi. The book’s initial words focus on Nephi’s record keeping, the origins of the records, their trustworthiness, and his immediate role in making them (1:1–3). The readers would also likely be struck by the amount of space devoted to Nephi’s father, Lehi. His experience of the Spirit (1:4–17) becomes the basis of his prophesying to the Jews in Jerusalem about the coming destruction of that city (during the first year of Zedekiah’s reign), “the coming of a Messiah,” as well as “the redemption of the world” (1:18–20). When his prophetic work is met with mocking, Lehi is directed to take his family (Sariah, his wife, and Nephi’s elder brothers Laman, Lemuel, and Sam) into the wilderness (2:1–7)—leaving their gold, silver, and precious things behind—taking little with him, a move against which Laman and Lemuel murmur (2:8–15), but which Nephi embraces and is blessed as a result (2:16–24).

Nearly the whole of 1 Nephi 3:1–5:22 is devoted to the obtaining of the brass plates of Laban by Nephi and his brothers, the consequences of such an acquisition, and the contents of the plates. Lehi’s command
(based on the Lord’s command via a dream) stands behind the quest to acquire the brass plates from their relative Laban. It would take Nephi and his brothers three attempts to retrieve successfully the plates of Laban. In their first attempt, Laman, chosen by lot, went to Laban’s house and requested the plates, which among other things contained the genealogy of Lehi. Laman encountered Laban’s anger in this attempt, with the result that Laman fled from his presence, determined to return to his father in the wilderness (1 Nephi 3:11–14). But Nephi persuaded his brothers to make a second attempt since if they had to leave their homeland, these records would prove instrumental in assisting their children to learn the language of their fathers and the words spoken by the mouths of the holy prophets. Gathering up their gold, silver, and precious things, they returned to Laban to try to barter for the plates. But Laban lusted after their property and sought it for himself. Leaving their property behind with Laban, they once again fled into the wilderness (3:15–27). After again encouraging his murmuring brothers to make yet a third attempt to secure the plates of brass from Laban, Nephi asked his brothers to hide while he went on alone. Coming upon Laban, who had fallen down drunk, Nephi took Laban’s sword as he was constrained by the Spirit to kill Laban—a prompting that Nephi resisted. A second time the Spirit instructed Nephi to kill Laban, who had been delivered into Nephi’s hands. In addition to the command, Nephi remembered that Laban had tried to kill Lehi’s sons, had refused to hearken to the commandments of the Lord, and had taken away their property. The third time the Spirit commanded Nephi to kill Laban, who had been delivered into his hands, Nephi took him by the hair of the head and smote off his head with Laban’s own sword. Dressing as Laban and speaking in the voice of Laban, Nephi commanded Laban’s servant to follow him and carry the plates of brass outside the treasury (4:1–29). The servant of Laban, whose name was Zoram, would wind up joining the brothers in the wilderness.

When the brothers reunited with the rest of the family, the contents of the plates were revealed as containing the five books of Moses, the prophecies of the holy prophets down to those of Jeremiah, and the genealogy of Lehi’s fathers, who were descendants of Joseph, the son of Jacob. Thus
the commandments of the Lord could be preserved for the children of Nephi and his brothers (1 Nephi 5:10–22). References to Nephi's initial work of writing down the things of God in his records/plates (6:1–6) and to the two sets of plates for which he is responsible (9:1–6) surround the content of the final section of part 1, again indicating the significance that records and plates hold (and will hold) in this narrative.

Later, Lehi instructs the brothers to return to Jerusalem once again, this time in order to bring Ishmael and his family into the wilderness, an action that results in a rebellion in the wilderness by Nephi's brothers Laman and Lemuel, two of Ishmael's daughters, and the two sons of Ishmael and their families against Nephi (and Lehi), Ishmael, Ishmael's wife, and his three other daughters (1 Nephi 7:1–22). Lehi's other major activity in part 1 is the recounting of his extensive dream of the tree and his preaching of the need for faithfulness on the part of Laman and Lemuel (8:2–38). The phrase “And thus it is. Amen” indicates that part 1 of 1 Nephi has come to a conclusion.

When the contents of part 2 of 1 Nephi (10:1–14:30) are examined in narrative order, it becomes clear that this entire portion of 1 Nephi is devoted to establishing Nephi as an authorized, Spirit-inspired spokesperson, as his father was before him. As this part begins, the readers are told that Nephi will now begin an account of his own proceedings, reign, and ministry. Yet, the first things to be described are not Nephi's own proceedings, reign, and ministry, but rather things that concern his father and brothers. As such, this section might be taken as an unnecessary diversion away from the stated purpose, but a closer examination of these verses reveals that this further description of Lehi's message serves as a transition that gives way to an account of Nephi's own Spirit-inspired activity. Narratively, one could say that in some ways Nephi's activities are rooted and grounded in that of his father. When the readers first make their way to this portion of 1 Nephi, they have a rather high opinion of Nephi, especially when compared to his brothers, but there is still some distance between their opinion of Nephi and their opinion of Lehi. However, in this section Nephi is transformed before their eyes into an authorized, Spirit-inspired spokesperson like his father.
The readers learn that not only does Lehi prophesy about the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile of its people, and the return of the captives to “the land of their inheritance” (1 Nephi 10:2–3), but he also goes on to predict the coming of a Messiah within six hundred years, “a Savior of the world,” a “Redeemer of the world” (10:4–6). Additionally, he predicts the coming of a prophet to prepare the way for this Messiah (10:7–10), the slaying of this Messiah, and the reception of “the fulness of the Gospel” by the Gentiles (10:11–15).

The magnitude of such things, revealed by the power of the Holy Ghost, created within Nephi a desire to know such Spirit-inspired mysteries for himself (1 Nephi 10:17–22), something for which he prays. In his subsequent conversation with the Spirit, Nephi sees the same tree as had Lehi and asks for its interpretation (11:1–12). By means of an angelic guide, Nephi is then given a panoramic view of prophetic history to include a remarkably detailed vision of Jesus Christ (who is named in 1 Nephi 12:18 [in the 1830 edition]) in the Old World (11:13–36) and his appearance in the New World (12:1–12), the unbelief and war that will ensue among Lehi’s descendants (12:13–23), the great and abominable church (13:1–9), the arrival of Gentiles in the promised land/New World (13:10–19), and Gentiles who have the record of the Jews (13:20–29). He also learns about the restoration of the gospel (13:30–37), sees additional records come forth (13:38–41), is assured that Gentiles can repent (13:42–14:7), sees the wrath of God poured out on the wicked (14:8–17), and even sees the apostle John (14:18–30). In other words, by means of his encounter with the Spirit, Nephi sees more redemptive history unfold before his eyes in astonishing detail than any Spirit-inspired spokesperson before him (in the Hebrew Bible or 1 Nephi to this point), uniquely qualifying him for his task as well as underscoring the truthfulness of the events described in the plates that follow (compare especially 14:30). And with this, the phrase “And thus it is. Amen” occurs, indicating the close of part 2 of 1 Nephi, leaving the readers with an intense level of expectancy for that which follows.

As the readers make their way from the contents of part 2 of 1 Nephi to part 3, they discover that their high level of expectancy with regard
to Nephi bears fruit, for at this point he begins to rival his father Lehi as a Spirit-inspired spokesperson, even serving as the interpreter of his father’s hard sayings for his brothers. This interpretive work includes the meaning of the allegory of the olive tree (1 Nephi 15:12–20) as well as the meaning of the tree, the rod, and the river (15:21–36). This all takes place between references to hard sayings (15:3 and 16:1–6), indicating that Nephi now possesses the Spirit-given abilities to understand such mysteries. Significantly, Nephi’s own Spirit-inspired activity is bounded on either side by the phrase, “Now, all these things were said and done as my father dwelt in a tent in the valley which he called Lemuel” (10:16; 16:6), suggesting that, though present, Lehi is no longer the center of Spirit-inspired activity in this section. This message is further reinforced by the fact that after Nephi, his brothers, and Zoram take as wives the daughters of Ishmael, it is noted, “And thus my father had fulfilled all the commandments of the Lord which had been given unto him” (16:8). Though Lehi will continue to have a major role in hearing the voice of the Lord and offering commands based upon such divine directives, these words suggest that more and more, Nephi will stand at center stage with the future of the book focusing more exclusively upon his activities.

The next section of part 3 concerns almost wholly the group’s travels in the wilderness, an undertaking commanded by Lehi when the voice of the Lord next speaks to him (1 Nephi 16:9). During this sojourn the readers are told of a brass ball of “curious workmanship” that acted as a compass of sorts, directing the travelers in the right direction (16:10–16). They also learn that Nephi breaks his steel bow, causing the group much hardship because of a lack of food. This event leads to more murmuring, so much so that even Lehi joins in (16:20), though he eventually inquires of the Lord and is humbled (16:24–25). Other noteworthy events include an account of the death of Ishmael (16:33–34), father-in-law of all (or most at any rate), the resulting murmuring and rebellion (16:35–39), and the trip to a place called Bountiful, so named because of its much fruit (17:1–6).

The next major section of part 3 focuses almost completely on the preparation and sailing of a ship to the New World. The section
commences when Nephi is commanded to build a ship (1 Nephi 17:7–16), an event that leads to even more murmuring by his brothers (17:17–22). Warning his brothers by means of a recounting of Israel’s history (17:23–47), Nephi commands them to stop their murmuring, a command accompanied by a divine sign (17:48–55). The text describes the construction of the ship (18:1–8), informs us that Lehi and Sariah have two additional sons—Jacob and Joseph, and gives a description of sailing to the promised land (18:9–25), which entailed more murmuring against, even physical persecution of, Nephi.

The final section of part 3 is devoted to Nephi’s accounting of the making and purpose of two sets of plates (1 Nephi 19:1–7), the first apparently consisting of the prophecies of Christ (19:8–21), the second consisting of prophecies from Isaiah 48–49 (1 Nephi 19:22–21:26). The section concludes with Nephi offering an interpretation of the words of Isaiah (and Zenos) for his brethren (22:1–31), which consists of warnings about future judgments, the great and abominable church, and a final word about the truthfulness of the plates, singling himself and his father out as examples of those who have testified and taught. As with the previous major parts, part 3 also concludes with the phrase “And thus it is. Amen” (22:31).

Though what I have offered is all too short and basic to do justice to the more detailed and painstaking literary analysis offered by Grant in his *Understanding*, it does, I think, suggest ways in which a more restrictive narrative analysis is less interested in discerning the narrator’s editorial motives with regard to inclusion and exclusion of hypothetical materials available to him and more interested in characterization in a less imagined way. In short, the characterization of Nephi in 1 Nephi relates to his own development into a Spirit-inspired spokesperson like his father Lehi, makes clear that he was especially chosen for and responsive to this calling, indicates the ways in which he stands apart from the murmuring lifestyle and dispositions of his brothers Laman

4. Of course, none of this should be taken to imply that Grant’s work is devoid of such less imaginative characterization studies, for in point of fact his work is replete with numerous such rich analyses.
and Lemuel, and demonstrates Nephi’s unique qualifications to lead those faithful to God in the New World. On such a reading, Nephi’s editorial motives do not seem to raise to the level of much narrative importance and in some ways might be seen as a distraction from the text’s primary emphasis.

To be clear, my thinking out loud with Grant and his work is not designed to suggest that I am right and Grant is wrong, or that Grant is right and I am wrong—no doubt a more likely scenario—on any individual interpretive point. Rather, it is an attempt to illustrate the different results that are generated by different literary approaches to the Book of Mormon, even by literary approaches that are very similar to one another as are Grant’s approach and my own. Clearly, the hermeneutical glasses worn by an individual interpreter results in that interpreter being able to see nuances in the same text that differ from those who wear a different pair of interpretive glasses, dare we say “interpreters.” Such observations are extremely important to acknowledge, given the fact that the literary and theological analysis of the Book of Mormon seems to be in its relative infancy in many ways and that much interpretive fruit can be borne by a variety of differing literary explorations. It should be clear that my own methodological engagement with Grant’s fine work is an attempt to put on paper the kinds of things I would be happy to discuss in person with my friend, for I am certain that he has thought deeply about such matters and that I (and others) will be all the richer for his responses.

Concluding reflections and appreciations

In conclusion, let there be no mistake that I consider Grant’s Understanding the Book of Mormon to be the most significant, thoroughgoing, literary analysis of the Book of Mormon to date. He succeeds in drawing attention to the literary aspects and characteristics of the Book of Mormon, while facilitating honest, vigorous, and sustainable conversations between Mormon and non-Mormon readers and scholars on the actual contents of the book. In my estimation, this exceptional monograph
is destined to be at the center of Book of Mormon studies for years—perhaps decades—to come, as the book's literary and theological content continues to receive more attention by both insiders and outsiders. If one can read only one book on the Book of Mormon, this might very well be the one. Book of Mormon studies have advanced enormously with the appearance of Grant Hardy’s work. As a relative newcomer to the discipline, I for one say thanks to Grant for this gift. I look forward to continued conversations with him about the book and to the continued academic contributions from this groundbreaking scholar.

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Beyond Understanding: Narrative Theory as Expansion in Book of Mormon Exegesis

Amy Easton-Flake

In academia, we at times experience scholarly envy when we read an article or book that we would like to have written. Reading Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon* while I was pursuing graduate studies in American literature and narratology was such a moment for me. In the five years since his seminal text appeared in 2010, I expected to find a burgeoning of Book of Mormon narrative readings as his work had clearly shown how fruitful such readings could be. Instead, I encountered silence. When I discussed his text with others, I heard praise for his work; yet it was often accompanied with what I found to be a problematic assumption that Hardy had uncovered and written about all that could be said within this vein of scholarship. In seeing Hardy’s text as the definitive narrative analysis of the Book of Mormon (certified by Oxford no less), we do a great disservice to both the Book of Mormon and Hardy’s work. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* should be viewed as the jumping-off point for a narrative-critical approach to the Book of Mormon and as one among many possible readings from such an approach. To aid in this process, I offer an article that is suggestive rather than definitive, theoretical rather than concrete, with more beginnings rather than conclusions. Focusing briefly on Hardy’s work, I note what I see as his major contributions and suggest where we might usefully push his scholarship further before turning our
attention to the field of biblical narrative criticism. The narrative-critical approach has become a vibrant field in biblical studies over the past thirty years, and in surveying some of its seminal texts, we find a host of new questions, analytical tools, and emphases that will enliven the future of Book of Mormon studies.

Quite possibly Hardy’s greatest contribution to furthering Book of Mormon scholarship within the academy is his decision to bracket questions of historicity and authorship and to focus instead on the form and sophistication of the text via its narrators—coupled, of course, with his ability to illustrate why such a focus is both justifiable and profitable. Using the three major narrators of the Book of Mormon to organize his discussion, Hardy introduces and illustrates some of their specific, representative literary techniques. While he is not the first to analyze literary aspects of the Book of Mormon, Hardy’s work is set apart from the work of others (such as Richard Dilworth Rust, James T. Duke, and Mark D. Thomas) in how he combines an introduction to Book of Mormon poetics with a masterful retelling of the narrative that reveals underlying organizational structures of the text often obscured by doctrinal and historical details.1 When brought to the surface, these organizational structures make the text much more accessible, particularly for those who are new to the Book of Mormon. In essence, Hardy focuses on the narrators as a way to understand the text, revealing that each has “a particular point of view, a theological vision, an agenda, and a characteristic style of writing” (p. 13).2 The results are impressive, as Hardy “deconstruct[s] the text in order to construct the narrators” (p. 23). Yet in pushing his foundational treatment of the narrators by borrowing more from the field of biblical narrative criticism, we may reach a mode of studying the text that will better accomplish Hardy’s stated aim: “to demonstrate a mode of literary analysis by which all readers, regardless


2. Internal references refer to Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
of their prior religious commitments or lack thereof, can discuss the book in useful and accurate ways” (p. xvii).

Hardy begins his work by explaining that his approach to the narrators should be acceptable to readers who see them as “actual historical figures” or “fictional characters created by Joseph Smith” because “their role in the narrative is the same in either case. After all, narrative is a mode of communication employed by both historians and novelists” (p. xvi). While most scholars would agree with the latter part of his assertion regarding narrative’s pervasiveness, his treatment of the narrators (and other characters) falls clearly on one side of a heated debate.\(^3\) Throughout the text, Hardy illustrates how “the entirety of [the Book of Mormon’s] contents and structure—including omissions, juxtapositions, repetitions, and selectivity—can be read as speech acts that reveal the personalities of its narrators” (p. 25). Similarly, he argues for “how reading for gaps, omissions, inconsistencies, and unexpected details can fill out our understanding of a person [referring to the narrators]” (p. 57). In treating individuals in the text as if they are real people, Hardy aligns himself implicitly (and explicitly as noted in his text; see p. 24) with narratologists such as Seymour Chatman who advance a realist approach to characters in opposition to the purist approach. The realist (or mimetic) approach argues that characters “acquire an independence from the plot in which they occur,” that essentially characters may be viewed and discussed as if they were autonomous beings with motives, values, and personalities.\(^4\) In contrast, the purist (or functional) approach rejects the idea that characters can be separated from their literary context or analyzed as autonomous individuals.\(^5\)

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While aligning with the realist approach gives Hardy great freedom to explore questions about the narrators and imagine backstories for them, this approach does limit one’s ability to engage with those scholars who adopt the more popular purist approach. A more far-reaching approach to character (and thus the Book of Mormon narrators) is that used by many narratologists and narrative-critical scholars of the Bible who adopt a middle-ground approach and argue that while characters and events in the text may depict real people, the “events [and characters] are always colored by their portrayal. . . . An actual event [or character] cannot be accessed in any pure state apart from its narrative portrayal.” For instance, Stephen Smith writes, “Undoubtedly, the Jesus of history serves as a model for Mark’s characterization. Many, if not all, the incidents reported will, in essence, have been real events in which the real Jesus participated; but the Markan Jesus is nevertheless a character who serves the interests of plot; he is, for example, taken out of real time and relocated in plotted time . . . and his actions not only conform to the structure of the plot, but disclose certain traits of his narrative character.” As we can see, this approach to character does not imply that a scholar does not believe that the characters in the text were real individuals (and consequently may be acceptable to those who accept the Book of Mormon’s historicity), but rather that a scholar recognizes that because of the narrative necessity of selection, arrangement, and interpretation, all “literary characters, whether real life or fiction, are given life by an author and re-created in the reader’s imagination.”

When we acknowledge the gap between reality and portrayal and do not fall for the “referential fallacy” (where we take what is implied or expressed in the narrative as a pure representation of events), we are in

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a position where those with disparate views on the origin of the Book of Mormon may engage with one another because our focus is purely on the text and what it presents. Distinctions between history and fiction become increasingly moot as we recognize that, as Scott S. Elliott writes, all representation “is scarred with traces of decisions regarding selection, arrangement, and interpretations of causality.” As Robert Scholes, a leading narrative theorist, summarizes simply, “No character in a book is a real person. Not even if he is in a history book and his name is Ulysses S. Grant.” Again, the reality of actual historical figures is not the question for narrative critics; rather, the recognition that any narrative is an approximation of reality and not reality itself enables history, biography, and fiction to all be analyzed from a common lens. Likewise, narrative criticism displaces the question of authorship because it introduces the implied author into the narrative equation. As R. Alan Culpepper explains, “As the real author writes, he or she makes decisions about the narrative, constructs the story, and tells it through the narrator in such a way that the narrator projects an image of the author, but the image may not conform to the identity of the real author at all.” Consequently narrative critics, in general, are not interested in ascertaining the real author but rather the impression of an implied author created through the work. Such a focus again bridges the origin divide and moves us closer to Hardy’s goal of “a mode of literary analysis by which all readers, regardless of their prior religious commitments or lack thereof, can discuss the book in useful and accurate ways” (p. xvii).

As we can see through this brief discussion of how to view characters, the vibrant fields of narratology and narrative criticism have much to offer Book of Mormon scholars if we wish to find a common ground from which to discuss the text. To further research in this vein, I offer a theoretical overview of some of the major areas within the
narrative-critical approach, accompanied by examples of applied analysis to the Book of Mormon in order to illustrate how borrowing from more established fields may enrich Book of Mormon scholarship. Since narrative criticism within biblical studies is in many respects quite different than narratology (its closest relative in literary studies at large), I focus my discussion on the narrative aspects most commonly discussed within biblical studies: setting, plot, narrative time, characters, point of view, narrators, and implied readers.

To begin, however, we must first understand what narrative criticism is as employed by New Testament scholars. Narrative criticism stems from new criticism and structuralism and analyzes solely the world internal to the text. It focuses on ascertaining the meaning of the text and discovering how the story communicates its meaning. The starting point for narrative criticism is the differentiation between story and discourse, between the “what” (the content of the narrative) and the “how” (the means by which content is expressed). This distinction allows readers to concentrate on how the narrative constructs its meaning, keeping in mind that everything in a narrative has been chosen, arranged, filtered, and framed. While some may question the validity of using modern narrative theory to describe ancient texts, the significant research done in the field of biblical studies for the past forty years clearly illustrates its applicability and usefulness. Speaking specifically to the value of narrative criticism for biblical studies, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon writes,

The value of narrative critical readings of the text is that they draw attention to the internal features of the story. It is tempting when


14. For an overview of the major objections and biblical scholars’ rebuttal, see Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 8–11.
we read the Bible to use the narrative like a window through which we look to understand more about the historical events that the story describes. Narrative criticism reminds us of the importance of viewing the text more like a picture, of focusing our attention on what is there rather than what is not and learning to read the significance of various “set” pieces such as typical scenes, reaction of characters, and so on. . . . Through the lens of narrative criticism, we can begin to see how the narrative itself functions both in communicating its message and in drawing the reader into responding to the events described.¹⁵

Narrative criticism invokes many new questions as it makes conscious what often remains unconscious in our reading experience and provides us with the vocabulary to share our discoveries.

Setting

Within biblical scholarship, one of the most significant differences between narrative and historical criticism is the treatment of settings. While historical criticism seeks to identify the actual location of the setting in order to think about how characters may have inhabited a space or moved from one place to the next as well as how that contextual knowledge may enrich our understanding, narrative criticism focuses on the internal meaning of the setting and how it functions. Narrative scholars often explore how settings establish the mood of the narrative, provide the occasion for plot conflicts, develop a character's mental, emotional, or spiritual state, act as a symbol of choices made, or evoke associations with larger ideals.¹⁶ If we apply this mode of inquiry to Book of Mormon studies, we would no longer focus on discovering the actual location of, for example, the place (and waters) of Mormon;

instead, we would look only at the internal information within the text to ascertain how the place functions. In such readings, we may analyze how the place of Mormon helps create a sense of safety within the text, provides the space for the formation of the church, and deepens the sense of these new converts removing themselves from society to create a distinct, God-following community. We may observe how collectively the converts take on the description of the place of Mormon and by association become pure, beautiful, and set apart (Mosiah 18). We may also explore how the creation of this safe haven and its subsequent discovery and invasion may affect the implied reader.

As James L. Resseguie reminds us, the definition of setting is expansive, encompassing not only geographical, topographical, and architectural features but also temporal, spatial, religious, political, social, and cultural aspects of the text. Props, clothing, and minor characters may also be saturated with meaning, thus qualifying as aspects of setting worth considering. In the Book of Mormon, the Nephite national treasures (the plates, Liahona, and sword of Laban) are good examples of symbolically rich props that at times further the plot and reveal characters’ spiritual state. The Liahona, for instance, first acts in the narrative as a compass for the family of Lehi; but because it only works according to their faith and diligence, it becomes a source of plot conflicts and discloses characters’ spiritual state (1 Nephi 16). Later in the narrative, it no longer fulfills its initial function, becoming instead a sign of leadership and authority as it is passed down with the other national treasures (Mosiah 1:16); it also takes on greater symbolic meaning as it is likened to receiving personal direction and the words of Christ (Alma 37:43–45).

Plot

According to M. H. Abrams, “the plot in a dramatic or narrative work is the structure of its actions, as these are ordered and rendered toward

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achieving particular emotional and artistic effects.” Recognizing differences between the story and the plot or “story as discoursed,” to use Chatman’s phrase, is essential if we want to understand how the Book of Mormon achieves its effects. Most practitioners of narrative criticism follow Gérard Genette’s foundational work and look more specifically at “the way plot serves a story by departing from the chronological order of its events, or expanding on some events while rushing through others, or returning to them, sometimes repeatedly.” A brief look at two aspects of Nephi’s narrative illustrates this well. Nephi reports to the reader that his family’s sojourn in the wilderness lasted eight years (1 Nephi 17:4), yet the stories themselves told in rapid succession appear to cover very little time (maybe a year at most). This discrepancy may lead an implied reader to wonder what else occurred during this time or to analyze more closely the stories Nephi does include to ascertain their significance to Nephi’s overall narrative. A focus on plot also helps readers realize that Nephi’s account of events once they reach the promised land consists of Lehi’s death, his brothers rebelling against him, the Lord warning him to depart into the wilderness, his people building a temple, and Nephi becoming their king—story information that essentially occupies a page. The other forty-plus pages devoted to the family’s life in the New World consist of Lehi’s last words to his sons, a sermon from Jacob, Nephi’s recounting of Isaiah, and Nephi’s final words to his people. Noting this emphasizes Nephi’s stated purpose for the small plates, which was to record the things of God (1 Nephi 6:3). This overt emphasis on prophetic words may cause the implied reader to focus on the doctrines and truths found within the text rather than on the characters.

If we follow Elliott’s advice and “attend most closely to moments in the text that are not easily assimilated into the coherent and comprehensive

(comprehensible story),”21 we will further discover issues that are significant to the implied author and moments that make the implied reader revise conceptions of God, his servants, and the religious life. For instance, Mormon’s long epistle regarding infant baptism that Moroni inserts into the text seems out of place within the narrative (Moroni 8)—a fact that may in turn emphasize the significance of this issue for the implied author. Dramatic events such as believers being thrown into a fire or slaughtered as they kneel in prayer may cause the implied reader to rethink what it means to be blessed of God and to prosper in the land (Alma 14:8; 24:21–22). In contrast, many unanticipated one-line statements that are subtly glossed over in the narrative (such as when the Lamanites after their conversion “yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession” or when Nephi raises his brother from the dead) should also cause the implied reader to pause and rethink the miracles that may attend the religious life (Helaman 5:52; 3 Nephi 7:19).

Another useful aspect of plot is analyzing the primacy and recency effects on the implied readers. The primacy effect looks at how the order of the material in a plot creates expectations, while the recency effect looks at how those expectations are fulfilled, modified, or shattered by what comes later.22 The portion of the text written by the implied author Mormon contains multiple examples of this as his narrative follows a basic prophecy and fulfillment pattern: for instance, Abinadi’s prophecy of the destiny of King Noah and his people (Mosiah 11:20–25; 17:15–18), repeated prophecy that the Nephites, dwindling in unbelief, would eventually become extinct,23 and most significantly, numerous messianic prophecies.24 The implied reader comes to trust Mormon unreservedly because he or she sees each of the prophecies fulfilled. However, some moments in the text do alter or shatter expectations. For instance, the

21. Elliott, Reconfiguring Mark’s Jesus, 94.
22. For more information, see Resseguie, Narrative Criticism of the New Testament, 209–10.
23. To give just a few examples: 1 Nephi 12:20–22; Alma 45:9–14; Helaman 15:17; Moroni 8:28–29.
24. To give just a few examples: 1 Nephi 19:8; 2 Nephi 10:3; Jacob 4:4; Mosiah 3:5; Alma 7:7–10; Helaman 5:9.
implied reader would likely expect Nephi’s plan to purchase the plates from Laban to be successful because of his stated faithfulness in following the Lord’s commandment to obtain the plates (1 Nephi 3:7, 15–25). However, his initial failure and then subsequent success—when he relies completely on the Lord and, obeying the Spirit, kills Laban—alters the implied reader’s fundamental understanding of what it means to follow the Lord (1 Nephi 3:22–4:34). Likewise, the Lord promises Mosiah that he will “deliver [his] sons out of the hands of the Lamanites” and many will “believe on their words” (Mosiah 28:7); however, both the afflictions they face (as they are cast into prison) and the number of Lamanites they convert exceed expectations, emphasizing that man’s conception and understanding is not the same as the Lord’s.  

If we remember that a plot, as Culpepper explains, “interprets events by placing them in a sequence, a context, a narrative world, which defines their meaning,” we will read the Book of Mormon more intensely as we seek to discover how the implied author “imposes a meaning on the events and convinces the reader that this meaning was implicit in the events all along.”

Narrative time

Narrative time is closely associated with plot. While story time is the passage of time during the story (i.e., Lehi’s family spent eight years in the wilderness, or it has been twenty years since they left Jerusalem), narrative time according to Culpepper (who borrows heavily from Genette) is “the order, duration, and frequency of events in the narrative.” As mentioned in the discussion of plot, noticing where the order of events in the narrative does not match the sequence in the story is fertile ground for asking new questions and determining the purpose and workings of the text. More specifically, when we discuss order we may look at “analepses,” which Genette defines as “any evocation after the

fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment”\textsuperscript{28} (e.g., the frequent recall of how the Lord led Lehi’s family to the promised land),\textsuperscript{29} or “prolepses,” that is, “any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later”\textsuperscript{30} (e.g., Christ’s visit to the Americas; see 1 Nephi 12:6). Genette obtains further precision by labeling analepses and prolepses that reference events entirely before or after the narrative as “external.”\textsuperscript{31} Perhaps the most interesting external prolepses in the Book of Mormon are the prophecies referring to the text itself.\textsuperscript{32} These prophecies about the role the text will one day play in bringing individuals to a knowledge of Christ serve to link and draw the implied modern reader into the text by casting the narrative forward to his or her time, in effect collapsing time since that which was foretold in the future of the story has already taken place in the implied reader’s past.

Noting closely another aspect of narrative time, duration (how long it takes to narrate a scene) may further enhance our analysis of the Book of Mormon since duration often indicates the importance of an event and its corresponding themes to an author. To analyze duration more systematically, we may think in terms of scenes (which often include dialogue or monologue), summaries (which provide only essential facts), ellipses (moments when a narrative leaves a gap), and descriptive pauses (“passages which mark no advance in story time but give an extended description of a setting, character, or emotion”).\textsuperscript{33} When we divide the Book of Mormon this way, we immediately see that emphasis in the text is given to sermons, missionary labors, the church’s founding, military tactics, and Christ’s visit, as these events are repeatedly

\textsuperscript{29} See, for instance, Alma 9:9; 37:38–39; Mosiah 7:20; 3 Nephi 5:20.
\textsuperscript{30} Genette, \textit{Narrative Discourse}, 40.
\textsuperscript{31} Genette, \textit{Narrative Discourse}, 40.
\textsuperscript{32} See, for instance, 2 Nephi 27:6–7, 11–14; 33:10–11; Mormon 5:12–14; Moroni 10:2–7.
\textsuperscript{33} Culpepper, \textit{Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel}, 71. For more information on duration, see Culpepper, \textit{Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel}, 70–73.
relayed in scenes. Periods of peace, in contrast, such as the four hundred years after Christ’s visit, merit a summary telling or become an ellipse (4 Nephi 1). Culpepper also recommends paying attention to those moments when the story time represented may be small but the narrative time “gives the reader an overview of much of the story to be presented in the rest of the narrative.”

Perhaps the best example of this in the Book of Mormon is Nephi’s vision that occurs near the very beginning of the story (1 Nephi 11–12). Densely packed with seminal events within the Book of Mormon (the wars between the Nephites and Lamanites, Christ’s visit to the Americas, and the Nephites eventual destruction), this vision quickly communicates a great deal of the story and leaves readers with questions that stimulate interest.

Similar to duration, frequency (how many times an event is narrated in a story) leads the implied reader to recognize the significance of certain moments and to think more carefully about what these events signify. In addition, the narration of an event more than once allows different perspectives as well as patterns to become apparent. For instance, Alma the Younger’s conversion is narrated three different times, and each narration constructs a different focus and purpose from which to view the events (Mosiah 27; Alma 36, 38). Conversion experiences in general may be seen as oft-repeated events in the Book of Mormon, and we may profitably analyze them to discover patterns and then to ask what these patterns mean. The same is true of numerous other events in the Book of Mormon, such as the preaching of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, the freeing of different groups from captivity, and conflicts between the Nephites and Lamanites. Frequency also becomes a significant narrative tool because the repetition of vocabulary, themes, activities, or setting may create an impression that these were characteristic of the individuals within a text. For instance, sermons, missionary labor, and the conversion of unlikely converts become the norm in the Book of Mormon—as does becoming wealthy, prideful, and turning away from the Lord after receiving rich blessings from his hand. These
actions and events are repeated so often that they come to define the people as a whole, and the implied reader uses them to fill ellipses and flesh out summaries.35

Characters and characterization

In the past ten years, work on character and characterization in biblical literary studies has exploded, offering Book of Mormon scholars many models by which they may identify characters and analyze their construction.36 In general, scholars divide characters into three groups (though the specific labels may differ). Protagonists are fully fledged characters who exhibit a range of traits and even personality. They are, according to W. J. Harvey, “the vehicle by which all the most interesting questions are raised; they evoke our beliefs, sympathies, revulsions; they incarnate the moral vision of the world inherent in the total novel. In a sense they are what the novel exists for; it exists to reveal them.”37 Examples of protagonists in the Book of Mormon include Nephi, Alma, Captain Moroni, and Mormon. Ficelles (types, or intermediate characters) are characters who possess limited and stereotypical traits and who often represent a class of people. Culpepper explains that “they exist to serve specific plot functions, often revealing the protagonist, and may carry a great deal of representative or symbolic value.”38 Examples of ficelles in the Book of Mormon include Laman

35. For more information on frequency, see Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel, 73–75.
and Lemuel, Teancum, King Noah, the sons of Mosiah, and the two thousand stripling warriors. The last category of characters is background characters (agents) who, as Adele Berlin explains, “appear in the narrative as functions of the plot or as part of the setting.” They exist solely for the effect they have on other characters or plot and nothing else is known about them (they are not characterized at all). Examples of agents in the Book of Mormon include Isabel, Ishmael, Zarahemla, and Lehonti. By first identifying which group (protagonist, ficelle, or agent) characters most closely resemble, we may then better recognize the thematic and rhetorical purposes they serve within the narrative. For instance, King Benjamin signifies the benefits of a king and foreshadows Christ as the ultimate king (Mosiah 2–5), while King Noah epitomizes the state of the “natural man” as an enemy to Christ and illustrates the destructive influence of wicked leadership (Mosiah 11, 19, 23). However, Berlin, and more recently Cornelis Bennema, reminds us that no distinct line separates these groups; consequently, it is often more useful to speak of the degree of characterization than of the type of characterization.

Characterization, as Mark Allan Powell explains, “is the process through which the implied author provides the implied reader with what is necessary to reconstruct a character from the narrative.” Characters are created not only by their speech and actions but also by the way others (narrator and characters) speak about and react to them. Characterization is often broken down into direct characterization (telling)—what we learn about the characters through direct statements about the character by himself, the narrator, or other characters—and indirect characterization (showing)—what we may deduce

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40. Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 32; Bennema, Encountering Jesus, 20–30.
42. For more information, see Resseguie, Narrative Criticism of the New Testament, 11–13; Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel, 106; and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, Mark’s Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).
about a character through words, thoughts, actions, and reactions of himself and others. At times direct and indirect characterization will confirm one another as they do in the portrayal of King Benjamin as a servant-king. His own statements characterize him as such, and these statements are then confirmed through his discourse to his people as well as his actions as recorded by the implied author. In other instances, though, such as that of Captain Moroni, direct and indirect characterization conflict. The implied author Mormon declares, “If all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men” (Alma 48:17). However, Captain Moroni’s actions frequently make him appear to be highly passionate, aggressive, rash, and quick to anger. Such seeming discrepancies between direct and indirect characterization


44. See Mosiah 2:11–19 for King Benjamin’s own statement; Mosiah, chapters 2–5, for his discourse; and Words of Mormon 1:10–18; Mosiah 6:7 for his actions as recorded by the implied author.

45. For instance, in order to reframe readers’ understanding of Captain Moroni’s military actions—such as when he kills four thousand of his own people in the capital city who refused to join him against an impending enemy attack (Alma 51:19)—Mormon repeatedly writes that Moroni “did not delight in bloodshed” (Alma 48:11; 55:19) but did what he saw as necessary to defend the freedom of his nation and the people’s right to worship God. Embedded letters from Moroni to other military leaders included in the text also reveal Moroni to be rash and emotional. In one instance, his temper overwhelms reason, and he breaks off negotiation for prisoner exchange with an enemy leader (Alma 54); in another, he condemns the chief judge of his own people for not sending desired provisions and reinforcements before he realizes that the actual situation hindered the chief judge from doing so (Alma 60:9; 61:9). Yet Mormon recasts and justifies Moroni’s actions by linking them to his commendable passion for liberty and by endowing him with pure motives: for example, he writes that Moroni acts only for “the welfare and safety of his people” (Alma 48:12); he is “firm in the faith of Christ” and will “defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion, even to the loss of his blood” (Alma 48:13; 50:1). Consequently, the image that Mormon creates of Moroni in his editorial comments is quite different from the one created solely by embedded historical documents and his actions within the narrative.
may cause the implied reader to think more critically about Moroni’s thematic and rhetorical significance and what it may mean to be a man of God according to the implied author.

To understand characters in the Book of Mormon more fully, we will benefit from asking similar questions to those of narrative critics, such as, “With what techniques or devices has [the author] made a living person live on paper, and how is this person related to the rest of narrative? . . . How does what the author chooses to tell about some characters relate to what he chooses to tell about others?” Analyzing closely the speech patterns (i.e., tone, vocabulary, sentence structure, length of speech) of both major and minor characters in the Book of Mormon will also help us understand both the characters and the process of characterization at a more sophisticated level. We may come to comprehend the implied authors of the text better as we (1) continuously recognize that in any description there is a necessary element of selectivity and (2) begin to ask what principles or norms for selection are employed by the different implied authors within the Book of Mormon.

Point of view and narrators

Narrators are most often the rhetorical device through which authors tell stories, speak to readers, and put forth a point of view that subjects and filters both characters and events. As Wayne C. Booth reminds us, “there is always a distinction [between author and narrator] even though the author himself may not have been aware of it as he wrote.” Consequently, those of us who accept the Book of Mormon as an actual historical record must

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47. For more information, see Elliott, *Reconfiguring Mark’s Jesus*, 79–80.
48. Powell discusses how ironically narrative criticism, which was first touted as a method that shifted the focus away from authorial intent, has come to be used by some to discover author and implied author intent. For a brief overview, see Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 26–32.
acknowledge and accept the space between author, implied author, and narrator if we are to speak about the Book of Mormon within a narrative context. Narrators may be aligned with the author and implied author, or they may not. They may tell the story from an internal perspective (as the main character or an omniscient undramatized voice) or they may tell the story from an external perspective (as a minor character or an undramatized voice of an observer). Regardless of their position to the story (or their relation to the implied author), the narrator’s point of view most often shapes and filters the settings, events, and characters of a narrative. Although point of view may shift throughout the narrative from implied author to narrator to various characters, the crucial matter here is that point of view is always at work selecting and filtering the potentially limitless narrative information.

Although Hardy explores the narrators (and by extension their point of view) to great effect, much still needs to be done in terms of analyzing and contrasting the three major Book of Mormon narrators’ style and tempo, actions within and outside of the story, ways of guiding the reader, standards of judgment, and so forth. When analyzing how narrators and point of view are functioning more specifically in the Book of Mormon, scholars may usefully apply Boris Uspensky’s four planes of point of view: “phraseological (what words and phrases are used in the narrative?); spatial-temporal (where and when are events narrated?); psychological (what are the characters’ thoughts and behaviors?); and ideological (what are the narrator’s norms, values, and worldview?)”

However, since this article intends to serve only as a brief introduction, we will focus on the ideological, or what Chatman calls the conceptual and Susan Lanser calls the subjective, point of view.

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The ideological point of view is the most important for Book of Mormon narrative analysis because it encompasses the narrative’s norms, values, and beliefs that the implied author wants the implied reader to adopt. To understand the Book of Mormon as the implied author would have us understand, we must first seek to ascertain the ideological point of view of the major narrators (Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni) by analyzing closely the way characters, events, and settings are described, the words and actions of characters, and what actions, characters, and events are approved or disapproved. Since the Book of Mormon has three distinct points of view (one by each of the major narrators), we may usefully look at the theological distinctions that exist among them or how the narrators expose different aspects of a life narrative or put forth different worldviews. For instance, Nephi waxes eloquent about the scattering and gathering of Israel, Mormon speaks at length about actual missionary labors, and Moroni recognizes the limitations of all efforts. In general, we might say that Nephi’s point of view promotes the theoretical and intellectual, Mormon’s the practical and experiential, and Moroni’s the consequential and postepisodic comprehending.

Relatedly, we might look at the point of view put forth by Nephi as character and Nephi as narrator and analyze when each of these viewpoints appear and how experience and age affect their perceptions. For instance, Nephi as character constantly implores his brothers to “give heed to the word of God” and “keep his commandments” (1 Nephi 15:25), but Nephi as narrator makes it clear to the reader that they will not. Similarly, Mormon as character keeps trying to help his people

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53. These distinctions may also be seen, for instance, in their discussion of Satan. Mormon’s discussion of Satan and his influences are tangible and real as he shares examples of antichrists and secret combinations (Alma 1; 30; Helaman 6; 3 Nephi 3). Nephi’s discussion of Satan is more theoretical as he shares and quote others explaining Satan’s role at large (1 Nephi 13–14; 2 Nephi 2; 9; 28). And Moroni focuses on the end result of Satan’s influence (Ether 8; 15; Moroni 8).

54. Nephi establishes Laman and Lemuel’s wickedness from the beginning by describing their “stiffneckedness,” “murmuring,” and inability to know the dealings of God. He also likens them “unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of [their] father” (1 Nephi 2:10–13). This is only the first of many instances.
spiritually and temporally, but Mormon as narrator recognizes the futility of his efforts. We may also profitably analyze how each narrator establishes his credibility and what he does to establish his perspective as correct and all conflicting perspectives as defective or strange. For instance, Nephi, from the very beginning of the record, narrates himself as the paragon of obedience who procures a vision even greater than his father’s dream (1 Nephi 11–14). Mormon presents himself as being trustworthy by immediately stating how his work is subjugated to the influence of the Lord: “The Lord [who] knoweth all things . . . worketh in me to do according to his will” (Words of Mormon 1:7), and Moroni builds rapport and credibility with his implied reader by stating, “Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing” (Mormon 8:35). To ascertain point of view, we may also ask ourselves how the implied reader is expected to view reality differently after reading the Book of Mormon. Such a question places our focus squarely on the narrative’s communicative purpose and the last major narrative aspect to be discussed: the ideal reader.

Implied reader

The implied reader, according to Wolfgang Iser, “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. . . . Thus the concept of the implied reader designates a network

Perhaps the most powerful is their refusal to partake of the fruit in Lehi’s dream (1 Nephi 8:35–36).

55. A good example of this paradox is in Mormon 2:12–13: “And it came to pass that when I, Mormon, saw their lamentation and their mourning and their sorrow before the Lord, my heart did begin to rejoice within me, knowing the mercies and the long-suffering of the Lord, therefore supposing that he would be merciful unto them that they would again become a righteous people. But behold this my joy was vain, for their sorrowing was not unto repentance, because of the goodness of God; but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin.” See also Mormon 2:18, 23–24; 3:1–3, 12.
of response inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text.”

The implied reader is not the actual reader of the text who may resist the narrative, disagree with its standards of judgment, or come with too little or too much knowledge to appreciate the narrative appropriately. Instead, the implied reader is the reader created by the text—one who possesses the necessary knowledge, attributes, and willingness to respond to the text as the implied author intends. Narratives inevitably create a picture of the implied reader; thus, through detailed analysis we may establish the implied reader for the Book of Mormon, which will allow us to comprehend the text more fully and appreciate it as its authors would have it be appreciated. In particular, noting differences among the implied readers created by the implied authors Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni may help us recognize more clearly the multiplicity of voices and views that are constantly intersecting and interacting with one another to create and challenge meanings within the text. In the Book of Mormon, we may also discover different aspects of the narrative working together to teach the reader how to read the text. The implied author Nephi, for instance, may be seen using the character Nephi to demonstrate the traits and attitude necessary to read the text correctly when he explains what Nephi does to procure his vision (1 Nephi 11:1). Although Nephi's example may not explicitly deal with a reading experience, it does contain the essential elements to be an ideal reader of the Book of Mormon as sacred text: a desire to discover the mysteries of God as explained in the text, faith that they exist within the text and that the Lord will help one understand them, and initiative to ponder the words of the text.

The implicit purpose of the Book of Mormon is to irrevocably alter the reader’s perception of the world. Consequently, understanding what the text requires of its readers, how it directs the production of meaning, and what happens when someone reads the text should be at the center


57. For more information, see Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel, 7–8; Chatman, Story and Discourse, 147–51; Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, Mark as Story, 137–39.
of a narrative reading of the Book of Mormon. A useful study of the Book of Mormon would be a detailed analysis of how a reader is being led to respond and react. For there are responses implied and required in every line of the narrative: the implied reader must fill gaps, recall earlier parts of the story, anticipate later parts of the story, feel suspense, identify and empathize with characters, have emotions aroused, have expectation raised and revised, trust the narrator’s explicit commentary, accept the narrator’s judgment and view of the world, and so on. Such a study would help us understand how a narrative may affect the reader and how the narrative works to create that impact. An important aspect of such a study would be looking at how rhetorical figures (such as parallelism, inclusion, anaphora, chiasmus, and rhetorical question) and figures of thought (such as hyperbole, paradox, and metaphor) are to impact the implied reader. While solid scholarship has already identified these literary aspects within the Book of Mormon, I contend that our analysis of these aspects will become much richer when we look at them in relation to the implied reader. Consequently, I argue that poetics such as these should be subsumed under the categories of narrators and implied readers, so that scholars emphasize and analyze the impact of these techniques rather than their mere existence. Such an approach is directly in line with the basic goal of narrative criticism designated by Powell: “to discern how the implied reader of a narrative would be expected to respond to the text”58 by analyzing how the reader is guided through these and the other devices (setting, plot, narrative time, characters, narrators) intrinsic to the art of storytelling.

Conclusion

In the 1980s when narrative criticism gained traction in biblical studies, it reinvigorated the field by asking a new set of questions concerning the

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way the Bible communicates its meaning. Like the seminal narrative-critical texts of the 1980s, Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon* clearly illustrates the vitality of adopting such an approach and should be mined for its many profound insights into the Book of Mormon and its narrators. And like these seminal texts, Hardy’s work should be regarded as the beginning rather than the summation of a narrative-critical approach that should inspire many to look more closely into the field of narrative criticism to see how it may inform our readings. The benefits will be vast as we turn our attention to reading and rereading the Book of Mormon closely, seeking to understand it on its own terms. Through this process, we will expose new considerations, explain different aspects of the text, make familiar narratives fresh, and stimulate greater appreciation for its literary design.

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The Book of Mormon Book Club

Grant Hardy

I confess that when I first heard the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* was planning a series of six-year-anniversary essays on *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, I was a little uneasy. I don't enjoy being the center of attention, and that's especially true in critical contexts. So I try to avoid listening to podcasts that I've made or watching videos of my teaching, and I generally read reviews of my books only once, as quickly as possible. I'm well aware that my work can be improved with criticism (I love copyeditors!), but it's nicer to receive feedback *before* one's ideas are sent into the world in their final form. Six years after the fact, both praise and criticism make me uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it is gratifying to think that one's work still matters even after the initial rush of readers and reviews. Heather does most of the cooking at our house, and her rule is that the family has to stay at the table for at least as long as it took to prepare the meal. Since *Understanding* was six years in the making, it seemed only polite to be taking another look at this point.

And then I saw the essays, which were uniformly kind and gracious, and I began to think of this exercise as more like a book club. Two of the authors are longtime friends, two are friends that I've met since *Understanding* was published, and two I've never met—though the quickest road to friendship is hearing someone say nice things about your children, or your book. In addition, three of the authors are Latter-day Saints (including one who first came to the LDS Church and the Book
of Mormon as an adult), and three are non-Mormons (including one from our sister denomination, the Community of Christ). The notion of a book club appeals to me because one of my goals in writing was to encourage more conversation about the Book of Mormon, which I think is a remarkable text regardless of whether people view it as literature, as fiction, as history, or as scripture. These are not mutually exclusive categories, and none of them is foreign to academic discourse, so I was hoping to find common ground that might help bridge the gap between devotional readers and secular scholars. Somewhat analogously, I’m Mormon rather than Confucian, yet I’ve spent a fair amount of time trying to spread the good news about the Confucian Classics and Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian*, which are also marvelous texts that can be approached as literature, fiction, history, and scripture. Hence, I have every reason to think that outsiders can read culturally significant books closely, enthusiastically, and sympathetically.

It was interesting for me to watch the authors grapple with the expansive yet limiting categories of history and fiction, coming as they do from different backgrounds, and I appreciated those who shared personal experiences. Readers tend to have lifetime relationships with at least a few books, and a disproportionate number of those books are probably scriptural. Almost by definition, this will be true of the believers among the six authors—as I noted in *Understanding*, the Book of Mormon is more often reread than read—yet because my own book is about another book, it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle one’s feelings about the two. That is to say, it’s possible that I wrote a deficient monograph, but the Book of Mormon is nevertheless awe-inspiring; or my work may have been a brilliant study of sacred text that is simply not that compelling to outsiders.¹ If this set of six responses had been offered in the context of an actual book club, I would have enjoyed listening to further conversations

¹ The latter judgment was expressed by Alan Wolfe in an early online review for *Slate*, which began memorably with the observation, “To a nonbeliever, all religions perplex, but Mormonism perplexes absolutely.” Even though Wolfe was, in the end, not persuaded by my arguments for the Book of Mormon’s literary worth, I was delighted that he was willing to give the book another chance and reread it. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2010/05/chloroform_in_print.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2010/05/chloroform_in_print.html).
among the participants, not just with me. So for fun, I’m going to pair them up and imagine how discussions might have gone.

Jana Riess came to my book from her perspective as an editor. As she read my attempts to differentiate the primary narrators of the Book of Mormon, she saw them as fellow spirits, working from behind the scenes to shape the narrative while keeping in mind their ultimate readers. A writer herself, she has a way with words (describing Captain Moroni as “quick to anger and slow to pray” is a lovely adaptation of a Book of Mormon expression), and her account of coming to see Nephi in a new, more sympathetic light—“his failures, rather than his many successes, won my heart”—mirrors my own experience. In many ways, Jana is my ideal reader, to use a technical narratological term. She gets what I’m doing. That is to say, she understands the game that I’m playing, and she is willing to play along, echoing some of my insights and adding her own.

I am fully aware that my approach is something of a game: it’s an experiment in reading, an attempt to discover a new way of making sense of this peculiar text, an approach that takes into account its unique structure in a manner that I hope might engage both believers and outsiders. Indeed, there’s a sort of playfulness in my imagining the inner lives of Book of Mormon characters, yet that doesn’t mean that there are no rules for what I’m doing—I try to pay attention to clues in the text, and the narrators themselves tell us a great deal about their intentions and motivations. And it doesn’t mean that I’m not taking the book seriously. The one place where Jana goes wrong is when she suggests that I’ve actually achieved “Alter’s standard of holistic interpretation.” I will never be the sort of reader and scholar that Robert Alter is (though a guy can always dream, I suppose), yet I have been inspired by his interpretation of biblical writers as being engaged in “the most serious playfulness.” The combination of piety and playfulness with regard to scripture is one of the things I most admire about Judaism.


3. I first encountered the idea that piety and playfulness could go hand in hand in a very different context, Richard Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*
Like Jana, Chris Thomas is also willing to play. Even though he is not Mormon himself, Chris has spent a lot of time reading the Book of Mormon closely, and he’s willing to take it on its own terms, at least provisionally, in an effort to understand it from literary or theological perspectives. As I suspect may be true for many outsiders, he acknowledges that while the question of whether the book is historically true or false is “certainly an important issue,” it’s one that he personally has little interest in. (This has been my experience as well in studying the sacred texts of other religious communities.) I was a bit chastened by his difficulty in categorizing my methodology. Perhaps I could have used different terms or explained them more carefully, because although I have borrowed from biblical scholarship, the Book of Mormon is not exactly like the Bible. I felt that “narrative analysis” might be a reasonable compromise between the genres of fiction and history, but he points out, as an accomplished biblical exegete himself, that the technique of narrative criticism generally restricts its focus to what is actually in the text, whereas I was practicing something more akin to redaction criticism. In that approach, interpreters attempt to discern the motivations of authors who are making use of previous sources, as when New Testament scholars try to reconstruct how the author of Luke selected and adapted from both Mark and the hypothetical sayings-gospel Q.

The Book of Mormon, with its constant references to sources in various plates and records, might seem like a prime candidate for redaction criticism, but the problem is that everything is internal to the text itself, so the historical-critical method, which includes redaction criticism, doesn’t quite work. On the other hand, the Nephite narrators are much more present and talkative than any narrators in the Bible—indeed they are themselves major characters—so that it is much easier to imagine their minds (and I think this is true regardless of whether they were actual historical figures or whether they are literary constructs that originated with Joseph Smith). The author of Luke–Acts speaks in his own voice in the prologue at Luke 1:1–4, and there are some cryptic uses

(New York: Knopf, 1963), 27–33, and I was immediately intrigued since that sensibility is uncommon in Mormonism. And yes, Hofstadter came from a Jewish background.
of the pronoun *we* in passages from Acts 16–28, but this is nothing like the Book of Mormon. The books would be more comparable if the New Testament presented itself as edited and narrated by Paul, who regularly interrupted his account to explain why he chose some incidents, gospels, and letters over others. So if “narrative criticism” and “redaction criticism” aren’t quite right, perhaps I should have gone with “rhetorical criticism.” In any case, Chris’s comments are a useful reminder that the tools of biblical scholarship, while tremendously useful, cannot be naively applied to the Book of Mormon.

What I most appreciate about Chris’s essay, however, is that once he identifies a potential problem, he offers a solution. Instead of my focus on the narrators as characters, he proposes an approach he feels would be aligned with “a more traditional narrative analysis perspective.” He suggests a relatively restricted attention to the structure of the narrative, especially as outlined by phrasal markers such the three iterations of “And thus it is. Amen.” So rather than beginning with a clear sense of the narrators and then working through the text, as I do in *Understanding*, he recommends a mode of sequential reading that allows the narrators to gradually reveal themselves, with readers taking the editorial interruptions as they come and allowing their perceptions to be shaped as the narrative unfolds. In short, Chris wants to change the rules of my game, or at least suggest a different sequence of moves. I’m interested, especially since Chris demonstrates some of the insights that might come as “the reader develops a relationship with Mormon” (“albeit a literary one,” he hastens to add). Of course, this sort of approach is much easier with my *Reader’s Edition*, which includes headings that identify the major structural components of the text as well as passages where the narrators jump in to address readers directly, and I’m not sure that “And thus it is. Amen” can bear quite so much interpretive weight. It might be better to work with the structure provided by the original chapter breaks, which have the added advantage of continuing into 2 Nephi. Nevertheless, it’s easy for me to imagine Chris and Jana and I continuing these sorts of

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4. I disagree, however, with his suggestion that the two sets of plates mentioned in 1 Nephi 19 consisted of “prophecies of Christ” and “prophecies from Isaiah 48–49.”
conversations, and I think we would all agree with his enthusiasm for pluralism: “the literary and theological analysis of the Book of Mormon seems to be in its relative infancy in many ways and . . . much interpretive fruit can be borne by a variety of differing literary explorations.”

By contrast, Dan Peterson and Adam Stokes want to play a different, though not unrelated, game. Ironically, they do not end up on the same team. Both authors found my arguments for the distinct styles and personalities of the three major narrators persuasive, but rather than taking those points as evidence for my own thesis, “that the Book of Mormon is a much more interesting text—rewarding sustained critical attention—than has generally been acknowledged by either Mormons or non-Mormons,” they want to employ my observations in a different debate, one that concerns the authenticity of the text and the trustworthiness of Joseph Smith. Adam writes, “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 Joseph Smith.” Dan concludes, “In Understanding the Book of Mormon, Hardy has also written one of the very best books of Mormon apologetics ever published.” Along the way, both make some valuable points. Dan’s suggestion that the Jaredite Chronicler might be a fourth narrative voice is interesting, though it’s hard to know how much of the book of Ether is Moroni’s paraphrase as opposed to direct quotations from his Jaredite sources. And Adam’s observation that scriptural interpretation takes place within religious communities is worth following up, especially if accompanied by a more careful analysis of the sometimes complicated relationships between the genres of literature and scripture (there are significant differences between the LDS Church and the Community of Christ on this matter, as well as differences among members of both denominations).

I’m happy that Adam’s and Dan’s faith was strengthened by my literary analysis. It matters to me that believers recognize the Book of Mormon that I’m describing as a text worthy of their faith and devotion. But at the same time, a book club is not a testimony meeting, and I’m wary

It seems much more likely that Nephi was referring to the large and small plates fore-shadowed in 1 Nephi 9.
that such talk might exclude outsiders. I want to hear what Chris and Liz have to say, and I’m happy for them to remain among the unconverted. In fact, I want to help them better understand the text in ways that make sense from non-Mormon or naturalistic perspectives. There’s a reason that I included parallels from both historians and novelists in Understanding, and I quite consciously ended with Nabokov and the Adi Granth rather than Thucydides. Dan quotes some of the passages where I point out interpretations that support traditional LDS beliefs (and he adds a great many more statements from Joseph Smith and his associates concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon), but there are also times when I bring up points that may challenge such beliefs, as in the quotation he relegated to footnote 32. I would hesitate, for a number of reasons, to describe my approach as “fair and balanced,” as Dan does—I’m pretty obviously a believer—but it’s important to me to leave space for naturalistic explanations. It is reasonable to believe the Book of Mormon is a revealed translation of an ancient record, and it is also reasonable to see it as a product of the nineteenth century. Intelligent, good people are on both sides of those arguments.

There is even a case to be made that these binary alternatives may not be the best way to make sense of the text. Dan quoted a sentence from Understanding where I expanded the possibility to three: miraculously translated historical document, conscious fraud (perhaps pious in nature), or delusion (perhaps sincerely believed). He missed the footnote (Understanding, p. 279) where I raised yet another possibility—that the Book of Mormon may be fiction written by God and revealed to Joseph Smith—and I probably should have added “work of religious genius (perhaps inspired) akin to the Qur’an or hard-to-explain achievements by child prodigies in music or mathematics” and “pseudepigraphical writing adopted by God and made authoritative through divinely mandated canonization (as many Jews and Christians regard the books of Deuteronomy, Esther, Job, the Pastoral Epistles, and 2 Peter).” Although I am firmly in the “translation” camp myself, I sometimes wonder if we have any idea just what a translation done “by the power and gift of God” really entails; it may bear very little resemblance to ordinary, academic translations.
All this is to say that the historical-critical method has significant limitations when it comes to interpreting and understanding scripture, as has become more and more evident to biblical scholars over the last few decades. This doesn’t mean that we can reject it out of hand and retreat to fideism—I love the Enlightenment and think that the world would be a better place if people paid much more attention to science, rational arguments, and empirical evidence—yet I’m not convinced that positivism is the measure of all things. At least this is what comes to mind when I contemplate how Dan and Adam share a belief in the divine origins of the Book of Mormon and nevertheless belong to different churches. The question of whether or not the book is true from a historical perspective may not ultimately be the most important thing we can take away from its study. It would be fascinating to listen to Dan and Adam talk through their differences as well as their agreements.

Where Adam and Dan share a deep concern with historicity, Amy Easton-Flake and Liz Fenton bring to my book a keen interest in literature. Most of Amy’s essay touches on Understanding only lightly as she identifies narratological features of the Book of Mormon that she believes warrant more nuanced, sophisticated investigation. I think that I actually addressed a number of the topics she raises, and I’m a bit wary of her heavy reliance on Alan Culpepper’s Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel—not because it’s a bad book, but because Book of Mormon narrative operates quite differently from the Gospel of John—but we are in complete agreement that Understanding is not “the definitive narrative analysis of the Book of Mormon.” Like Amy, I was hoping that my book would be a conversation starter, and I deliberately avoided technical, jargon-laden narratological analysis, in part because I wanted my work to be accessible to a broader audience, but also since I don’t really feel qualified to take on such a task. Yet there is most certainly room for more formal studies of the Book of Mormon narratology that match, for example, those of Irene de Jong’s on the Homeric epics.5 One of

the most striking characteristics of the Book of Mormon, at least for me, is how its sophisticated narrative techniques seem at odds with the awkwardness of the diction.

Liz’s literary expertise is evident in both her cogent analysis and her graceful writing. I’ve saved her essay for last since I found it to be the most rewarding and also the most challenging. She is interested in the Book of Mormon as an example of nineteenth-century American fiction, and it’s an admirable thing to enter into a foreign world of belief far enough to have a scholarly conversation; religious texts can often be opaque or frustrating to those who are not looking for salvation therein. Yet in this case, to adopt her metaphor, she has come through the threshold bearing interpretive insights. Her essay was the one most thoroughly engaged with my book, and as she reviewed some of my ideas about narrators, chronological disjunctions, internal intertextuality, and biblical allusions, she was able to suggest alternatives or push my analysis further in useful ways. Her question about the relationship between familial histories and national histories opens up a promising line of inquiry, and I wish that I had written these sentences: “Nephi struggles with the problem of knowing how a story will end before it begins, and Mormon tries to make the past present in order to prophesy a coming future. Moroni’s own reluctant narrative attempts to remedy one past with another, all while living in a destroyed present.”

Liz is willing to travel with me quite a ways in my explorations of the Book of Mormon, but there’s a limit; eventually she reaches a threshold that seems impassable: “While Hardy’s approach allows him to generate important observations about the structure of the text, it also creates rhetorical space in which, for all his disavowals, he can talk about Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as if they are historical figures. In the context of narrative theory, narrators are devices designed to achieve particular effects just like other narrative elements (perspective, narratee, author function, etc.).” Perhaps I can urge her to take just a couple more steps.

It seems to me that the narrators in the Book of Mormon are not quite like the other narrative elements she lists; rather, they are fully rounded, self-disclosing characters. She asserts that “narrators do not
have realizations,” but characters do, and readers trying to understand plots are often called upon to imagine characters “as thinking subjects driven by goals and motives.” The Book of Mormon is at times explicit about mental realizations; Sariah says “Now I know of a surety that the Lord has commanded my husband” (1 Nephi 5:8), and Amulek catches himself midthought for a correction: “I never have known much of the ways of the Lord, and his mysteries and marvelous power. I said I never had known much of these things; but behold, I mistake, for I have seen much of his mysteries and his marvelous power; yea, even in the preservation of the lives of this people” (Alma 10:5). The narrators similarly tell us directly about their inner lives, yet—as with other characters from throughout fiction—their intentions and understandings are also revealed through their actions, and within the framework of the Book of Mormon narrative, those actions include their writing and editorial endeavors.

To use an example from another idiosyncratic work, published one hundred years after Joseph Smith’s, I remember first picking up Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*—because I had heard that it was a classic—and being entirely mystified by its opening pages. Even though I was in college and a reasonably good reader, I had no idea what was going on. Only later, after I learned that the first chapter is narrated in a nonlinear, stream-of-consciousness style by the mentally disabled character Benjy, was I able to return to the novel and appreciate its remarkable strengths. I’m suggesting that the Book of Mormon, like *The Sound and the Fury*, can’t be fully understood without entering deeply into the minds of its narrator-characters, who not only tell stories, but are represented as being the authors of the account that we are reading. I hope that such an approach is not impossible for those who regard the book as a novel; at the same time, I think that believers can benefit from careful readings that pay much more attention to the nineteenth-century context of the Book of Mormon than I did in *Understanding*. I look forward to additional studies from historians and scholars of literature that start from the assumption that the book is religious fiction.
There was only one point where I felt that Liz had entirely missed the mark, and that is when she suggested that “his conflation of narrator and author functions actually allows Hardy to treat the book as a Mesoamerican artifact.” I have followed the geographical debates of Book of Mormon historicists from a distance, and while I believe the arguments for a Central American setting are probably stronger, I don’t primarily think of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni as Mesoamerican figures. There is very little in the Book of Mormon that correlates directly with locations, culture, or lifestyles from southern Mexico and Guatemala of two thousand years ago, and I tended to ignore all of that in *Understanding*; I was mostly interested in the world created by the text.

On the other hand, I fear that another of her observations was uncomfortably apt. She complained that my “voicing of nonbelievers’ potential explanations for the text’s various features often reads like parody.” Ouch. I can see why she might feel that way, but it was not my intention (though admittedly, I have spent less time trying to see the book through the eyes of outsiders than from a believing point of view). So in retrospect, I can see the glibness in my suggestion that Moroni’s portion of the book might be the result of “Joseph Smith’s literary exuberance and delight in creating new characters [leading] him to continue the story just a little longer.” I probably should have given that possibility more sustained consideration. I still think that there is a literary verve to the Book of Mormon that is difficult to contain, yet there is also a theological energy that can be attributed to Smith, and the book of Ether allowed him space to work out a few more ideas. Liz notes the repair of the fall implicit in the brother of Jared’s story, and I could have said more about the way the Jaredite account universalizes the Nephite experience as it replicates its major contours. Liz and I are never going to be in the same place religiously—as she observes, some thresholds cannot be crossed—but to the extent that we’re both interested in the Book of Mormon as literature, she can help me better understand how outside scholars, coming to the task as adult readers with professional skills, can make sense of a book that I have been reading my entire life.
I appreciate the opportunity for conversation extended by the editors of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. It’s pleasant to think of *Understanding* as a book that offers common ground for dialogue among people whose opinions and backgrounds are different enough to make those discussions interesting, profitable, and a little unsettling for everyone involved. It used to be that the only people who wanted to talk about the Book of Mormon were Mormons and anti-Mormons. Now it appears that the conversation can be broadened to include scholars from secular academia. There is, however, another group of new, enthusiastic readers who might have been invited to the Book of Mormon Book Club, and even though I’m a little discomfited by the way their playfulness far exceeds their piety, they nevertheless have some engaging things to say. I’m thinking of professional authors like Jane Barnes and Avi Steinberg who see Joseph Smith as a kindred spirit and bring a writerly sensibility to his work.6 (I hope they won’t mind if I use their first names.)

Jane tells us that she had long been fascinated by Joseph Smith but was never able to make much headway with the Book of Mormon until she recognized its obsession with texts and realized that “the three different narrators—Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni—are also characters in the drama; though they live at different times and each is very individual, they agree on the prophetic essentials of Christ’s coming.” I would like to imagine that at some point she came across *Understanding*, but perhaps she is just a very gifted reader on her own. In any case, she is able to make observations that never would have occurred to me: “It’s as if Thomas Pynchon had fabulated a work about the direction of modern religious literature by writing in the style of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.” And at some length:

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The whole Book of Mormon is surprisingly the Declaration of Independence for scripture. Not only does it break Christ out of the Bible, a scary and liberating act for the living God, but it also understands the consequences. If the Bible needs to be supported by further scripture, then all sorts of prophets, all sorts of individuals will claim their scripture is the holy one. Joseph’s scripture sees to the bottom of this crisis. Christ must be made anew in a world where his reign will be decided by the battle of the books.

Yet when she conjures up a scene where Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer meet Joseph Smith and help him with the plates, I start to better understand how Liz must feel when she is reading my book.⁷

For a while, Jane considered converting to Mormonism before deciding in the end that it wasn’t for her. Avi, also a nonmember, was so enamored of the Book of Mormon that he devoted a year and a half to retracing its steps, from Jerusalem to Central America to the Hill Cumorah in upstate New York. Like Jane, he never mentions me explicitly, though some of his descriptions appear to echo themes from my book, as in his lovely evocation of Moroni’s labors:

The only thing worse than writing his sad tale, it seems, would be finishing it. Maybe all those decades passed because Moroni just couldn’t bring himself to complete the project. With his people gone, his sole purpose in life became finishing the book. But doing so would also mean acknowledging that the Nephites’ story—his story—was truly over. In burying the plates, he was burying more than just the plates.⁸

Avi’s profoundly interactive approach to the Book of Mormon, as fiction, allows him to see things in provocative ways that are new to me. So when he contemplates Joseph Smith’s relationship with the Bible—“To read a single book that closely, and in this kind of enraptured way, is a radical way to read and, as a result, opens up radical

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literary possibilities”—I think of Nephi reading the brass plates, and indeed reading himself into them. He continues:

Joseph appealed to me most because he seemed like a writer anyone could identify with but whose literary ambitions were fantastically peculiar. Unlike me, or anyone I knew, Joseph had set a fairly imposing goal for his first book: to have it stand next to the Bible. . . . Was it possible that Joseph simply carried the literary impulse to its logical extreme? . . . Did he lose himself in it? Did Joseph Smith's life represent what happens if you're really dedicated to literature, like, really dedicated? Did Joseph do this so we don't have to?

It's a fresh, charming way to envision Joseph Smith, even if I can't adopt it wholeheartedly myself. At the same time, there are other observations that I have found directly useful, as when he points out that “Nephi and his descendants in the New World were farther from home than anyone in the Bible.” The theme of exile is a powerful driver of the Book of Mormon narrative, and one that I would like to investigate more thoroughly in future studies.9

Indeed, Avi's conception of a book that draws its readers into its world, so much that their lives are transformed by it, is not that far from my next project. Understanding focused on the text as literature (or as literary history), but much more could be said about what it means to read the Book of Mormon as scripture. There are two sentences from the essays that keep coming back to me, and pushing me forward. The first is Dan's assertion that “analyzing [the Book of Mormon's] historiography doesn't reach its doctrinal or hortatory core, let alone its significance as a witness of Christ.” That seems right to me; there is still much to be done in exploring the book's theological implications. And a comment from Jana points toward the radical, destabilizing potential of the Book of Mormon, even if her exact words are a little off-center: “By making a close study of the complexity of the Book of Mormon (and, by extension, its creators), [Hardy] is also teaching us new ways to imagine God.” But I

don’t think that it’s me; that’s what the Book of Mormon itself does, if we as believers have ears to hear, or as outsiders, eyes to observe critically and empathetically.