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**Abstract** Review of *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (2007), by Brant A. Gardner.

## SETTING A NEW STANDARD

James E. Faulconer

Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*. 6 vols. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007. *Volume 1: First Nephi*, 469 pp.; *Volume 2: Second Nephi–Jacob*, 626 pp.; *Volume 3: Enos–Mosiah*, 543 pp.; *Volume 4: Alma*, 845 pp.; *Volume 5: Helaman–Third Nephi*, 669 pp.; *Volume 6: Fourth Nephi–Moroni*, 698 pp. (each with bibliography and index). \$39.95 each except vol. 4 (\$49.95).

Beginning with George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl's seven-volume *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (1955–61), Latter-day Saints have produced commentaries on the Book of Mormon. Few, however, have measured up to Reynolds and Sjodahl's intent to respond to the Book of Mormon in a scholarly manner that takes the antiquity of the Book of Mormon as a given and then comes at the text with reflection informed by as much contemporary scholarship as possible. Brant A. Gardner takes up that challenge: "My goal is to concentrate the insights of many disciplines and scholars to provide greater understanding of a particular passage, and as a result, the greater message of the text as a whole" (1:xi). I would say that Gardner's is the first such textually based and academically informed commentary on the Book of Mormon since Reynolds and Sjodahl.

Each entry in these volumes begins with a pericope of scripture from the Book of Mormon. That is important because this is a textual commentary that "concentrates on the composition and structure of the original text on the plates that Joseph Smith translated" (1:xii). Gardner is interested in history, ideas, culture, theology, and so forth,

and his commentary shows it. But he ties that interest directly to the text, beginning from it and using it as the standard for judging the things he says.

Gardner follows the pericope with two kinds of comments, those on text and those on context. The textual analysis may involve anything from a discussion of “the composition and structure of the original plates” (1:xii) to a look at the import of variations in the original and printer’s manuscripts of the Book of Mormon or an analysis of the rhetoric of the passage. The content analysis responds to matters in the text such as doctrine (which Gardner is quite right to call, instead, “scripture,” eschewing any claim to authority on what the Book of Mormon teaches), geography, and symbolism, and it includes Gardner’s attempts to understand the history and culture of Book of Mormon peoples.

Importantly, when Gardner comments on such things as Book of Mormon geography (in which he follows John L. Sorenson’s correlation of the Book of Mormon to Mesoamerican geography), he “attempts to find Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon rather than the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica” (1:4). In other words, Gardner looks for things that we know about Mesoamerican culture that will bring light to our understanding of the Book of Mormon rather than trying to show how the influence of Book of Mormon peoples can be found in Mesoamerica. The result is a responsible application of scholarship to the Book of Mormon. As Mark Alan Wright says on the dust jacket for the Alma volume, “Gardner paints a vivid picture of events in Alma through his deft application of reputable scholarship in Mesoamerican culture. Warfare, economics, agriculture, religious practices—all take on new solidity in this fascinating approach.” Readers can see an example of this application of contemporary scholarship in Gardner’s discussion of the Gadianton robbers: “Mormon is describing, not a band of thieves or brigands, but a city-state that had its own agricultural base but increased its wealth by subjugating other cities and forcing them to pay tribute” (5:247).

More important, however, than Gardner’s careful and responsible use of contemporary scholarship is his careful and responsible reading

of the text itself. Though he does not give as much credence as many other scholars do to Royal Skousen's theory that the Book of Mormon is a "tight" translation (in other words, one in which there is tight control over how the underlying text is translated rather than one in which the translator exercises judgment in the translation process), Gardner gives reasons for his difference with Skousen,<sup>1</sup> and Gardner's comments are very helpful. For example, he introduces his textual commentary on 1 Nephi with an excellent discussion of the parallels between 1 Nephi and the account of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Further, he insists on reading the Book of Mormon as an *ancient* text. In other words, he considers the conventions of ancient texts to be important in understanding the Book of Mormon.

See, for example, the way Gardner deals with Alma 7:23–24 (4:133–36), where he discusses each term of the series in Alma's admonition (humble, submissive, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of patience and long-suffering, temperate in all things, diligent in keeping the commandments, asking for whatsoever things ye stand in need, always returning thanks) but avoids making the mistake of thinking that each term can be understood independently of the rest. Having discussed each, he reminds us that many of the terms are "conceptual repetitions of other attributes in the same paragraph" (4:136), a literary technique of triangulating meaning that is also found in both Maya and, later, Aztec literature. And Gardner is careful to note that this parallel between the Book of Mormon and those Mesoamerican languages is worth noting but *not* a proof of connection between the original language of the Book of Mormon and those languages.

Also indicative of Gardner's faithfulness to the Book of Mormon itself is his discussion of the Nephite understanding of God (1:214–22). Gardner responds to the question of how to understand the original Book of Mormon manuscript's "mother of God" (1 Nephi 15:18) by asking what it means in the Book of Mormon rather than how to make what it says fit with the usual contemporary Latter-day Saint understanding of the text. He refers to the scholarship on the Israelite kings Josiah and Hezekiah, using that and other scholarship to lay

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1. See, for example, 1:15 n. 2.

out a coherent, intelligible interpretation of the Book of Mormon understanding of God, one that does its work without, as so many have done, falling into the trap of interpreting the Book of Mormon's teaching through the lenses of medieval Christian theology. By itself this excursus makes Gardner's contribution valuable, and all the more valuable because it insists on giving the Book of Mormon its due while also insisting that since the book is ancient, we can read it against an ancient background.

Gardner not only provides a unique tool for understanding the Book of Mormon as an ancient document written by real, living prophets, but he sets a standard for Latter-day Saint thinking and writing about scripture, providing a model for all who follow. One can only hope that others who write about scripture will see what he has done and imitate it in their own way.

Gardner's commentary is sufficiently expensive that few Latter-day Saints are likely to buy it for personal use. I recommend, however, that they consider doing so. Save up your money! No other reference source will prove as thorough and valuable for serious readers of the Book of Mormon.