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Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide

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Grant Hardy. *Understanding the Book of Mormon:
A Reader's Guide.*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Steven C. Walker

Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide needs no recommendation. It is recommended already by its authorship, commended to us by Grant Hardy's careful and helpful earlier work editing *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*. Hardy was educated at Yale and is now a professor at the University of North Carolina; his promising new volume is further certified by its impressive Oxford Press imprimatur, and by Hardy's tactic of inviting vettings from some of our foremost Book of Mormon scholars—"Phil Barlow, Kent Brown, Richard Bushman, Terryl Givens, Royal Skousen, and Jack Welch" (ix).

That may be recommendation enough for the best of books, but there is a further strength that commends it. It meets a clear need. A friend eyeing the title on my desk smiled: "*Understanding the Book of Mormon?* My wife reads through the Book of Mormon religiously every year—not because she loves it, she says, but because she can never understand it. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* is definitely the book for her."

Understanding the Book of Mormon may be the book for a lot of us. As often as we Latter-day Saints have read the Book of Mormon, we may yet read it better, read it with more understanding, if we were to read it with the benefit of the perceptive perspective that Hardy opens up for us with this volume. For all our Book of Mormon enthusiasms and even our critically careful analyses, we may have sometimes shortchanged ourselves in our readings in the same way Oliver Cowdery did in his translating: "Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind" (D&C 9:7–8). However well we have done in seeking testimonies of the book, we have done less well at understanding all we might of it.

In this practical guide, Grant Hardy shows readers how to read deeper into the Book of Mormon. Hardy not only maps but also models a way to

do that: focus on the literary aspects. Hardy seems to hold out hope that a literary approach will invite even unbelieving readers into the book. I am less hopeful on that front. Unbelieving readers (for whom much of the focus of the Book of Mormon revolves around their unbelief) aren't likely to willingly suspend that disbelief, not even for the rich textual rewards Hardy demonstrates so definitively. On the other hand, they might be open enough in light of this literary approach to concede the book is better written than previous readings revealed. Even unbelievers might not be so determined to read the Book of Mormon so reductively that they fail to recognize richer ways to read it.

I am more sanguine about the impact of Hardy's literary approach on believers. It is not only non-Mormons, he contends, who have sometimes willfully misread the Book of Mormon. Sometimes we too have read so exclusively on our terms that we have ignored some of the book's terms. We, as well as less sympathetic readers, may have missed some of what this rich scripture reveals because we have been so bent on seeing in it the reflection of our own ideological expectations. I am not so naïve as to expect us to forego our historical and theological readings in favor of reading the Book of Mormon as a straightforward narrative—we have so much invested in those traditional Mormon approaches, and we've realized so much from them. But I see no good reason why believers, determined as we are to read this profound book as profoundly as possible, would not wish to enrich our reading with Hardy's literary exegesis, particularly in light of how clearly he illuminates how much we have overlooked by looking only through our traditional lenses.

It's possible to gain insight into a book by reading against its grain. But Hardy is probably right that we can understand a book's intentions better by reading with respect for the way it is written. If we were to adopt Hardy's literary approach, we might still be prone to read the Book of Mormon as if it were one long sermon instead of narrative inset with infrequent sermon, an extensive story that includes, given its serious ecclesiastical concerns, remarkably few sermons. We might still read it as if it were an awkward anachronistic version of modern history instead of a superb ecclesiastical history focused not so much on our current concerns with historical chronicling as on moral insight. But even if we continued to insist upon it as mostly history or mostly theology, reading it for its literary dimensions as well could help us see more of what's available in it.

The problem with approaching the book so exclusively on our terms is that we may be missing out on some of its terms. "The danger of starting with nineteenth-century controversies [or with Joseph Smith's unmet adolescent needs, or with the religious debates of the Burned-over District, or

with Mesoamerican archeology, or, closer to home, with manifestations of the truth of the Church or evidences of Joseph Smith's prophetic status] and then mining the narrative for relevant verses is that such a procedure may distort and misrepresent what the book actually says; it ignores the underlying logic of the text" (184). Believers, as much as unbelievers, have found the Book of Mormon to be a remarkably responsive text, providing whatever any of us have wanted to find. All of us may have been less successful, believers as much as unbelievers, at finding out all that the book wants to say to us.

Hardy proposes a practical cure for the habit of reading more into the book than we get out of it: his key to understanding the Book of Mormon is reading this unique volume not only as historical artifact or theological treatise but as literary fact, focusing on the underlying logic of the text. Unbelievers might see more in the book if they read it as more than as a psychological manifestation of its author or as a cultural phenomenon. Believers might see more in it if they read it as more than merely proof text for their theology or simply as an icon of their faith. Hardy shows us how to read the Book of Mormon not just as evidence of something other than itself, but as narrative that might have something to say to us directly.

Hardy zeroes in on what would strike most first-time readers as the central fact of the book, the narrative itself. This is of course hardly virgin territory in Book of Mormon readings. Researchers have thought long before this time to do word studies and style analysis of the various Book of Mormon voices. We've enjoyed superb readings of the book from traditional premises in rich textual directions—John W. Welch's illuminating formal and legal analyses, Royal Skousen's careful textual studies, Richard L. Bushman's character appraisals, S. Kent Brown's thoughtful insights into tone, Richard Dilworth Rust's helpful attention to literary forms, Bruce Jorgensen's and George Tate's fine analyses of typology. Hardy's purely literary reading is a logical extension of the best of our textual analyses. "Hardy enters the text by way of the motivations, personalities, and perceptions of its narrators, and therein lies his justification for avoiding, at least temporarily, the historical questions and the epistemological commitments they entail."¹ Reading not only the *narrative* but also the *narrators* is a bold critical move. Hardy is proposing reading the Book of Mormon straight on as what it claims to be, without the scaffolding or distractions of extratextual issues.

I confess a personal bias that tends to fuel my enthusiasm toward his project of reading the Book of Mormon as literature. I have taught "Bible as Literature" at BYU for forty years; my friend Charles Swift teaches "Book of Mormon as Literature." Practical experience reading scripture as if it were actually literature has converted our professional lives into a quest in pursuit of the literary dimension of scripture. The literary approach Hardy

proposes works in our classrooms so well at inviting readers deeper into the text, enabling readers to relate narrative to personal experience, and empowering readers to liken scripture to themselves, that we may have become a little fanatical about the benefits of reading scripture as literature.

The main benefit is eminently practical: the Book of Mormon reads better as literature because that's what it is. It may be significant that God in giving scripture did not provide us a mathematical equation or a chemical formula or an economics flowchart, or even a self-help list of things to do today or a liturgy or the Sunday School manual some of us seem to think it is. He gave us mostly narrative, biography, poetry. He gave us literature. Reading what is mostly story as if it were mostly sermon, we are bound to miss much of it. That may be why readers discover so much when they approach scripture with anything like the kind of readerly alertness and personal engagement they routinely grant books like *Pride and Prejudice* or even *The DaVinci Code*.

Charles and I have found that reading scripture at least as inquisitively, as responsively, as thoughtfully as we would a good novel makes it more illuminating. The Book of Mormon read as literature proves to be surprisingly good literature. As much as literature enriches my English teacherly life, I find more—more enlightenment, more wisdom, more human insight—in 1 Nephi alone, read as literature, than in any novel I've ever read, even such a richly insightful novel as *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

So I admit Hardy's urging of a literary approach to the Book of Mormon preaches to members of the literary choir. But I suspect even the most traditional of readers—dedicated readers, reverent readers, readers disposed to worry that a literary reading could somehow reduce the Book of Mormon text, minimizing its spiritual impact or trivializing its theological implications—can hardly fail to find Hardy's literary approaches not just intellectually insightful but spiritually stimulating. Those are my claims, not Hardy's. Hardy's thesis is less ambitious but more fundamental: insofar as we neglect reading the Book of Mormon as the literature that it is, we may be missing some of what the book is about.

I like Hardy's unassuming authorial posture, his refusal to badger us. *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, for all its insistence that there are better ways to read the book, seldom pontificates or judges. Hardy consistently understates his case, allowing the evidence to speak for itself. He juxtaposes, for example, a detailed Richard Bushman paean praising the multifaceted fascinations of the characters of the Book of Mormon with Dan Vogel's "decidedly less impressed" assessment: "Most often we encounter flat, uncomplicated, two-dimensional heroes and villains." Though there's no question which side of that debate Hardy comes down on, he leaves

approval or disapproval of either view up to readers when he sums up the contrasting perspectives: "How someone responds to the personalities in the Book of Mormon will vary according to his or her tastes and inclinations, but it is also a function of how well he or she reads" (31–32).

I find that fair-mindedness compelling, the more so amid the rabid biases that can confuse Book of Mormon debates. Hardy's position is all the more convincing for me as a believer because it has a chance of convincing a nonbeliever that there may be something worth reading in the Book of Mormon. Not that I am persuaded Hardy's approach will persuade unbelievers in droves into the pages of the Book of Mormon. It is probably too objective, too uncommitted, too calmly motivated to impel uncommitted readers. But the emphasis on invitation rather than confrontation might invite some fence-sitting readers. Certainly the usual "read and pray about it" approach will not be nearly so inviting to those who may be reluctant to pray as Hardy's stance of "read it and see."

Whether that invitational posture may be truer to the book's actual stance is another question. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* focuses where it promises—on understanding rather than polemics, shared insight rather than ideological debate, clarification rather than conversion. The Book of Mormon itself seems much more concerned with changing the worldview and even the lifestyle of its readers. The closest Hardy comes to proselyting us to his approach is his implicit suggestion that we consider, as Mormons or non-Mormons, whether we may be missing something.

We probably are. An inherent strength of the literary approach to reading scripture is the wide latitude it enjoys. Book of Mormon literary readings have ranged in the past half century from psychological investigations of character to typological studies to, most frequently and fertile, formal analysis of genres and literary patterns found in the Psalm of Nephi, in epistolary forms, and in textual analyses that climax in Welch's monumental disclosures on chiasmus. Hardy pushes these earlier literary explorations to their logical conclusion. His tactic universalizes, looks at the underlying logic of the entire text, attempts to read the book more holistically and integrally than previous piecemeal literary approaches that examined particular details or textual dimensions.

That comprehensiveness does more than adapt his approach to the total Book of Mormon text. It tends to internalize his reading. His literary reading stance puts him in a position where, rather than measuring aspects of style or substance against external standards, Hardy can look more exclusively at the text itself, and look at it through the encompassing lens of story, of the narrative itself. He examines that pervasive narrative as it is shaped by the major Book of Mormon narrators, Nephi, Mormon, and

Moroni: “Each chapter focuses on a representative writing strategy adopted by the narrators; . . . how Nephi adapts biblical passages to reflect his own circumstances, how Mormon organizes his material to provide a rational, evidentiary basis for faith, and then how Moroni comes to reject that [evidentiary] model of belief” (28).

It’s a fruitful approach, “stunningly fruitful,” as Rosalynde Welch indicates with a smile in her *Patheos* post: “A reader as intelligent, attentive, and sensitive as Hardy could fruitfully read the back of a cereal box.”² Hardy’s kind of narratological detective work by its very nature takes us deeper into the text; considering why the narrators said what they said, the way they said it, makes us inherently more aware of their meaning. And this careful reading between the scriptural lines dramatically demonstrates how much more there is to find as we go deeper. Viewed through Hardy’s literary lenses, the Book of Mormon is a better-written book than has been noticed—not just by its non-Mormon detractors like Mark Twain, with his wicked pun on the Book of Ether as “chloroform in print.” Hardy suspects the Book of Mormon may be even better written than has been noticed by its Mormon defenders.

That’s why this adroit author invests most of his authorial energy in demonstrating how much better written the book is than has been assumed. Hardy is canny in his Sherlock Holmes literary mode, sleuthing fuller story and more complete character from the slightest details—sometimes even missing details. The process can be highly speculative, but it can uncover significant insights. Under the magnifying glass of *A Reader’s Guide*, Nephi’s narrative reveals itself to Hardy as a sacred text that affirms the human voices of its writers as emphatically as the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

Observed closely from Hardy’s perspective, for example, Nephi’s criticism of his older brothers might reveal itself as sometimes defensive. Nephi can appear to be reassuring himself about his own failings and the disappointing schism in the new colony, so that Laman and Lemuel, in this behind-the-scenes literary light, come to look more like scapegoats and less like villains. Hardy observes: “Whatever else they may have been, Laman and Lemuel appear to have been orthodox, observant Jews. Nephi—who has a vested interest in revealing their moral shortcomings—never accuses them of idolatry, false swearing, Sabbath breaking, drunkenness, adultery, or ritual uncleanness—the worst he can come up with is ‘rudeness’” (39). Even more tellingly, “despite their doubts, complaints, and anger, [Laman and Lemuel] nevertheless continue to stay with the family. In fact, they usually end up doing exactly what Lehi and Nephi have requested of them” (40).

That may push the point too far—if Nephi doesn't directly indict, the text surely accuses Laman and Lemuel of something close to attempted homicide and treason to the family. But it is true that the obstreperous older brothers, from a literary perspective, can be seen to toe a surprisingly orthodox line as the villains of the narrative. Some readers have wondered why the Book of Mormon morality seems so cut and dried, so black-and-white in contrast with the subtle way the "implicit theology of the Hebrew Bible dictates a complex moral and psychological realism in biblical narrative because God's purposes are always entrammeled in history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization."³ The Book of Mormon's apparently simplistic morality seems to some readers more like myth than history. Hardy's reading reminds us just how nuanced the book's motives and moral implications really are. By reasserting the text's literary realism, he underwrites not only its psychological truth but its historical accuracy.

Hardy peers with fertile narratological insight into the authorial soul not just of Nephi but of all three of the central Book of Mormon narrators. "On a first reading, [Mormon's] work is quite didactic. He is an active narrator who makes judgments, inserts comments, and proclaims moral principles" (155). But deeper reading shows there may be more to Mormon than first meets our oversimplifying eye: "There are additional insights to be gained from comparing and contrasting [his] related narratives, and this process allows for much more open-ended and evocative readings" (179).

Hardy, by means of that kind of careful textual excavation, helps us uncover compelling insights, as with his perspective on Christ's sermons in Third Nephi, which he sees as "more like interpreting prophecy" than "following structured arguments or straightforward narrative." "A discourse such as this has to be read and reread with multiple perspectives in mind, working from the whole to the parts and vice versa. For all readers, this type of writing presents a challenge in identifying and interpreting major themes; for believers, such passages are virtual invitations to ask for and receive further revelation" (201).

And Hardy demonstrates some striking instances of how these revelatory insights can be won. Hardy's literary tools enable him to unearth surprising possibilities, as when he points out that Moroni may have compensated for the name-titles the Jaredites used for deity (such as *Lord*) by inserting more explicitly Christian terms to make their book more compatible with the rest of the Book of Mormon: "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" (235).

These literary insights manifest what might be a better book than we thought we knew—certainly a more nuanced book, definitely a better written book, and in some ways maybe even a truer book. Hardy's reading backlights and underwrites the high quality of the narrative. "When read verse by verse, the Book of Mormon can sink under the weight of its repetitive, awkward sentences, but when viewed from the perspective of the narrators—who are envisioned as deliberately shaping the texts they create—it exhibits a literary exuberance that frustrates quick judgments and reductive analyses" (267).

That narratological approach zeroes in so well on the core of Book of Mormon concerns that it may make a strength of my major hesitation about Hardy's study. The literary approach of *Understanding the Book of Mormon* depends upon close readings of narratives and narrators. Hardy's strength, on the other hand, is not so much in close reading as in perception of larger patterns, "what Robert Alter once described as 'a continuous reading of the text instead of a nervous hovering over its various small components'" (268). Compared with his exemplars for close reading, biblical scholars like Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg and Book of Mormon experts like John W. Welch and Royal Skousen, Hardy is less concretely complex, better at the big picture than at concatenating details. But the silver lining to whatever critical cloud that assessment may create is that readers are likely to feel about Hardy's literary perspective what I feel—even when it does not take us far enough into the Book of Mormon, it invites us to go deeper on our own.

Insofar as Hardy is attempting to bracket issues of historicity from concerns about literary merit, his literary reading will miss much of what the Book of Mormon is about. Insofar as he sees literary and historical aspects as complementary dimensions of a more complex volume than we have realized, his emphasis on the literature of this surprisingly literary text cannot help but to make us more aware of the profundity of a book that may amount to more than even its appreciators have appreciated. The bottom line of Hardy's approach to the Book of Mormon is that there are in it many great and important things yet to be revealed.

In a landscape where critics like Dan Vogel so persistently underestimate literary strength and where the enthusiasts sometimes reduce it to formula, Hardy's comprehensive restraint is more than a breath of fresh air in Book of Mormon studies; it encourages trust, not just in Hardy, but in the Book of Mormon. I was surprised at how seldom in 327 pages of close argument I thought "that's a stretch" and how often it appeared to me "that

point could be pushed deeper.” Hardy’s careful understatement makes me feel not merely that I am enjoying a better Book of Mormon reading, but that there are better readings yet to come.

That engaging understatement highlights the considerable accomplishment of this good book—open-endedness so inviting that Hardy’s techniques empower us to read ourselves ever more profoundly into the text. Hardy has not given us just another retelling of the same old Book of Mormon story. He may have given us a better way for us to liken it to ourselves. *A Reader’s Guide* helps us do precisely what its title promises: read the Book of Mormon with more understanding. However much you may dislike the Book of Mormon or however much you may like it, you’re likely to like it more after reading *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. We have benefitted greatly from Moroni’s showing us how to know the Book of Mormon is true. Grant Hardy is showing us how to find more truth in it.

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1. Rosalynde Welch, “A Landmark Achievement,” *Patheos* <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Landmark-Achievement-Rosalynde-Welch-01-12-2011?print=1>.

2. Welch, “Landmark Achievement.”

3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 12.