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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).[1] 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.[2] Daniel Kidder's 1842 exposé found it "nothing but a medley of incoherent absurdities."[3] A

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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).

2. "The Mormons," *Religious Herald*, 9 April 1840, 1.

3. Daniel P. Kidder, *Mormonism and the Mormons: A Historical View of the Rise and Progress of the Sect Self-Styled Latter-Day Saints* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1842), 330 (in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: "The Book of Mormon"* [Independence, MO: Zion's Printing, 1943], 2:199).

"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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4. J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages: or, The Rise, Progress, and Causes of Mormonism* (New York: Platt & Peters, 1842), 19 (Kirkham, *New Witness*, 2:186).

5. Bernard DeVoto, "The Centennial of Mormonism," *American Mercury* 19 (1930): 5.

6. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26, emphasis deleted.

7. Hugh Nibley, "Good People and Bad People," in *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 337–38.

Smith's authorship, and non-Mormons, dismissing the book as a fraud, have been more likely to ridicule than to read it."[8]

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,

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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"),[9] 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

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9. See http://mormonscholarstestify.org/243/grant-hardy.

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,

are attuned to how the Book of Mormon resembles the Bible, but just as important are the ways in which the two books are dissimilar. Indeed, a narrator-centered approach immediately highlights one crucial difference. It may appear that both works are library-like collections of distinct books written over time by various authors, but where scholarly scrutiny suggests that many of the biblical books as we have them today were produced by multiple, self-effacing redactors, the Book of Mormon presents itself as the work

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).[10] And it turns out, under his meticulous
and fruitful analysis, that "Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni are major char-
acters 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 theo-
logical vision, an agenda, and a characteristic style of writing" (p. 13).
"Clearly," Hardy remarks,

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10. He offers argument in justification of this approach on pp. 23–28.

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.[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.)[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.[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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11. See Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 61–93; a revised and shorter version of the same article has been published as Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 22–31; see also Royal Skousen, "The Systematic Text of the Book of Mormon," in *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, ed. M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 45–66.

12. See Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 67–75; Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon," 25.

13. See Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 62; Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon," 24.

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 metalic 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]

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14. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints Herald* 26/19 (1 October 1879): 289–90; also in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:541.

15. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 289–90; also in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:541. Original spellings have been retained.

16. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 290; also in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:541–42.

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.[17]

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."[18]

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

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17. Joseph Smith III, letter to James T. Cobb, 14 February 1879, Letterbook 2, pp. 85–88, Library-Archives, Community of Christ; also in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:544.

18. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 290; also in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:542.

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."[19]

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."[20]

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.*[21] 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.[22]

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19. *Chicago Times*, 17 October 1881, as given in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin, 1991), 76. Compare Whitmer's reply to J. W. Chatburn, as reported in *Saints Herald* 29 (15 June 1882) and reproduced in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 92.

20. *St. Louis Republican*, 16 July 1884, as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 139–40.

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.

23. _Chicago Tribune_, 17 December 1885, in Cook, _David Whitmer Interviews_, 173.

24. William McLellin to My Dear Friends, February 1870, in Cook, _David Whitmer Interviews_, 233–34, brackets and enclosed text in original.

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

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25. *Saints Herald* 29 (1 March 1882), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 86.

26. *Omaha Herald*, 17 October 1886, as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 199.

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."[27]

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.[28] 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)

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27. Cited at Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 76.

28. See John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, with Erick B. Carlson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book, 2005), 80, who informs us that the translation of the Book of Mormon took place essentially between 7 April and the end of June 1829, a period of less than three months.

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."[29]

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

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29. Edward Stevenson, "One of the Three Witnesses: Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris," *Millennial Star* 44 (6 February 1882): 86.

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.[30]

Furthermore, it is clear from careful analysis of the original manuscript 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 Oliver 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.[31]

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),

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30. Stevenson, "One of the Three Witnesses," 86–87.

31. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical 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 the Book of Mormon," 27–28.

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

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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).

33. Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* 9 (January
1916): 454; also in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:530.

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.'"[35] 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 ofttimes 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."[36]

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."[37]

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 pur-loined 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

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38. See, for starters, Eldin Ricks, *The Case of the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Olympus, 1961); Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1983), republished in 1986 by Deseret Book; Rhett Stephens James, *The Man Who Knew: The Early Years* (Cache Valley, UT: Martin Harris Pageant Committee, 1983), dealing with Martin Harris; Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*; Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 18–31, 125–27; Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015); Anthony

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)

Sweat, "Hefted and Handled: Tangible Interactions with Book of Mormon Objects," in Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull, eds., *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015), 61–79.

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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39. Hardy offers examples on pp. 112, 116.