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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 gleaned 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

Portions of this essay appeared previously in two separate blog posts. See "The Best Mormon Book of 2010: Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon*," Beliefnet .com, 29 November 2010, accessed December 3, 2015, <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/flunkingsainthood/2010/11/the-best-mormon-book-published-in-2010-grant-hardys-understanding-the-book-of-mormon.html>; and "The Agony of Nephi," Religion News Service, 26 June 2013, accessed December 3, 2015, <http://janariess.religionnews.com/2013/06/26/the-agony-of-nephi/>.

1. Jana Riess, *The Book of Mormon: Selections Annotated and Explained*, SkyLight Illuminations series (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2005).

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).²

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

2. Internal references refer to Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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.

Jana Riess is a senior columnist for Religion News Service and holds a PhD in American religious history from Columbia University. She is the author or coauthor of numerous books, including *Flunking Sainthood*, *The Twible*, *Mormonism and American Politics*, and *Selections from the Book of Mormon, Annotated and Explained*.