



1-1-2016

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John Christopher Thomas

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Thomas, John Christopher (2016) "A View from the Outside—An Appreciative Engagement with Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol25/iss1/9>

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

*John Christopher Thomas*

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

## A testimony

My initial encounter with the Book of Mormon came in January 1974 as a result of a visit to Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah. The college touring choir of which I was a member was in the midst of a trip across the United States, from Cleveland, Tennessee, to California and back again. Having visited the impressive Tabernacle, complete with a

demonstration of its acoustic sophistication, we stopped by the Visitors' Center before continuing on our journey, where several of us received a complimentary copy of the Book of Mormon, the one with the iconic light blue cover. Little did I know that the reception of this copy would be the first of numerous encounters with Mormonism and its distinctive book over the next four decades.

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

It was during my last study leave during the summer and autumn terms of 2013, the year before I turned sixty, that I decided to undertake an extensive—formal—study of the Book of Mormon, in addition to the other research projects for which in part I was granted the study leave by the Pentecostal Theological Seminary—projects that I completed, by the way. Perhaps it was approaching my sixtieth year that prompted me to move from informal, occasional study of the book to a more formal and structured one—to close a personal loop if you will. So, having located a theological seminary within the restorationist tradition—the Community of Christ Seminary in Independence, Missouri—and having gained admission as a student, I began to work my way through the extensive reading list of monographs. During this period, before I made the trip to campus for a week of interaction with my tutor, two unexpected things happened to me. First, despite the plethora of studies devoted to the Book of Mormon, I was disappointed to learn that few of them addressed many of the questions (at least under one cover) that I brought to this text, for most of the works, whatever the topic or method, seemed primarily interested in whether or not the Book

of Mormon is historically true or false, verifiable or not—certainly an important issue but not the only issue, nor was it the one in which I was most interested. Oddly, to me, even some works devoted to literary approaches wound up being forced into the service of this evidentialist apologetic, an approach I must admit that I have very little interest in, even among biblical scholars seeking to defend this or that point. My own interests are primarily literary and theological, with extensive interests in reception history. Second, it was during this period that I became aware of what I was being called to do. I should perhaps note that during the course of my academic life I have felt a spiritual calling to every major research project that I have undertaken, and surprisingly, I felt I was being called to write a short introduction to the Book of Mormon that addressed the many issues that I, as one trained in biblical studies and an outsider, brought to the text. Specifically, I was interested in the book's structure, content, theology, reception history, and putting the book into conversation with my own Pentecostal tradition, before taking up any issues related to origins, especially given its contentious and overrepresented place in the literature available to me. As the reader may have guessed by now, it was somewhere during this period of reading and exploration that I first encountered Grant's *Understanding the Book of Mormon*. Its appeal was immediate and I found it extraordinarily helpful and inviting.

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

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

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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).

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

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

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

As one for whom the Book of Mormon does not function as scripture, I find that both of Grant’s judgments are reasonable if not compelling. His assessment of the current impasse that exists between many insiders and outsiders exhibits an honesty and sensitivity that does not always find a place in such academic conversations about the Book of Mormon. Such a judgment seems bang on the mark to me. At the same time, his judgment with regard to proposing a methodology with which members of both groups could feel comfortable—an inclusive method if you will—is itself bold and eminently insightful. By focusing on the literary and theological aspects of the narrative itself, the proposal dovetails nicely with a methodological move that has swept across a variety

of academic disciplines, meaning that it is methodologically at home with inquiries in a broad set of disciplines. It is also a methodological approach that treats texts, especially religious texts, with the kind of sensitivity they deserve by examining what the texts themselves say rather than explaining them (away) by means of a historical critical approach. Another benefit, which is not always fully appreciated, is that this methodological approach can produce results that are often much more accessible to everyday readers than is sometimes the case with the utilization of certain other methodological approaches.

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

The monograph is very well written and quite user friendly. Throughout, Grant maintains an irenic tone while grappling with the implications of his analysis for those who hold the book to be scripture and those who do not. He almost always accomplishes his goals. His tone and honesty make the book a pleasure to read and ensure that the literary interpretation(s) he sets forth will receive a sympathetic hearing and response, whether or not one agrees with his conclusions and faith claims. Not content with offering literary soundings that are ultimately forced into the service of determining issues of origins or using his analysis as an opportunity to offer any number of devotional insights about the book, Grant keeps a sharp focus on his literary and theological objectives. In the process, he produces a monograph that not only brings numerous, heretofore-unnoticed dimensions of the text

to light but also generates a seismic shift in the terrain of the academic study of this book. It would seem that the discipline of Book of Mormon studies has been significantly altered by Grant's work and that as a result such literary dimensions of the text can no longer be ignored in serious engagements with the Book of Mormon.

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

Rather than following either of the aforementioned approaches, what I would like to do in the rest of this short celebration piece is to think outloud with Grant (and any others who might be interested in listening in), sharing a few thoughts that occurred to me during my reading of his fine book. Specifically, I would like to compare notes with

Grant about the way certain dimensions of the Book of Mormon appear a bit differently when approached from a slightly differently calibrated literary approach.

Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon*—  
thinking outloud with Grant

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

*Structure*

The first issue that made me wonder how an exploration from a more traditional narrative analysis perspective might look differently from



Grant's work concerned the structure of the Book of Mormon. Grant seemed to give two clues about the book's structure. The first is his straightforward identification of the book's basic structure (p. 10) as:

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

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

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

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2. Book of Mormon quotations reflect the 1830 text with LDS versification.

that both figures will have more than passing significance in the pages to follow.

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

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

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

who is taken back up in the book that immediately follows the Words of Mormon (Mosiah 1:1–6:5).

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

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

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3. Actually, the words of Mormon mark the conclusion of each major section of 3 Nephi at 5:10–20, 10:11–19, 26:8–13, and 28:13–30:2.

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

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

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

It is difficult to underestimate the structural significance of Mormon and Moroni for the book, for not only do they appear together as an *inclusio* around the entire narrative, but they also appear (often together) at a variety of strategic locations throughout, orienting the readers as to their own location in the broader composition, apprising them of the specific plates and records being relied upon, and assuring the readers of the trustworthiness of the accounts. In each case it seems that Mormon, Moroni, or both, appear when the narrative introduces a new set of plates from which the record is drawn. Thus, standing at the beginning (the

title page), at the end of the small plates of Nephi, at the end of the large plates of Nephi, and on either side of the plates found by the people of Limhi, Mormon and/or Moroni appear as structural markers for the readers, providing recognizable landmarks to guide them.

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

#### *Reading backward or forward*

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

However, such an approach complicates the narrative reader's reading experience where the implied reader (that is, the reader implied by the text) is constructed by the implied author (that is, the author

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

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

A third aspect of my reading experience that made me wonder about how differently a particular issue would look from a more traditional narrative analysis has to do with those occasions when some of Grant's historical judgments seem to go beyond narrative characterization. For the purposes of illustration, I will focus on his analysis of Nephi.

As with his decision to treat the Book of Mormon as a history-like narrative, so in the case of his use of characterization, Grant makes a conscious decision that he believes best fits the genre and narrative of the book. Citing a variety of literary theorists in support of his approach (pp. 23–25), he seems to make a conscious decision to push beyond what in biblical studies is normally thought to be the limits of characterization, while stopping short of historical criticism itself. The rationale for this phenomenon is set forth rather early on when Grant acknowledges:

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

One of the places where the results of such an approach become clear is in his discussion of Nephi's narration of his brothers Laman and Lemuel as "stock characters, even caricatures" (pp. 32–33). Grant describes Nephi's brother Sam as "bland to the point of being nearly a nonentity," not a discernible presence during family conflicts, never uttering a single word in the book. At issue for Grant seems to be the

desire to discern why Nephi writes as he does, tells the story in the way he does. In other words, it appears that Grant wants to get inside the mind of the character Nephi based on details in the text. It should be noted that at times his detective work seems to have textual standing when, for example, he lays out all the reasons why he suspects that Nephi has no sons among his children.

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



At any rate, I wondered how the characterization of Nephi and his brothers might differ in a more traditional narrative analysis with its rather modest goals for characterization. Perhaps a brief overview of 1 Nephi will illustrate what a basic, more narrowly defined narrative analysis would generate with regard to the basic characterization of individuals in 1 Nephi. So—to a brief reading of 1 Nephi.

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

Part 1. Lehi and his sons (1:1–9:6)

Part 2. Nephi becomes a spirit-empowered spokesperson (10:1–14:30)

Part 3. Nephi leads the community (15:1–22:31)

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

Nearly the whole of 1 Nephi 3:1–5:22 is devoted to the obtaining of the brass plates of Laban by Nephi and his brothers, the consequences of such an acquisition, and the contents of the plates. Lehi’s command

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

When the brothers reunited with the rest of the family, the contents of the plates were revealed as containing the five books of Moses, the prophecies of the holy prophets down to those of Jeremiah, and the genealogy of Lehi's fathers, who were descendants of Joseph, the son of Jacob. Thus

the commandments of the Lord could be preserved for the children of Nephi and his brothers (1 Nephi 5:10–22). References to Nephi's initial work of writing down the things of God in his records/plates (6:1–6) and to the two sets of plates for which he is responsible (9:1–6) surround the content of the final section of part 1, again indicating the significance that records and plates hold (and will hold) in this narrative.

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

When the contents of part 2 of 1 Nephi (10:1–14:30) are examined in narrative order, it becomes clear that this entire portion of 1 Nephi is devoted to establishing Nephi as an authorized, Spirit-inspired spokesperson, as his father was before him. As this part begins, the readers are told that Nephi will now begin an account of his own proceedings, reign, and ministry. Yet, the first things to be described are not Nephi's own proceedings, reign, and ministry, but rather things that concern his father and brothers. As such, this section might be taken as an unnecessary diversion away from the stated purpose, but a closer examination of these verses reveals that this further description of Lehi's message serves as a transition that gives way to an account of Nephi's own Spirit-inspired activity. Narratively, one could say that in some ways Nephi's activities are rooted and grounded in that of his father. When the readers first make their way to this portion of 1 Nephi, they have a rather high opinion of Nephi, especially when compared to his brothers, but there is still some distance between their opinion of Nephi and their opinion of Lehi. However, in this section Nephi is transformed before their eyes into an authorized, Spirit-inspired spokesperson like his father.

The readers learn that not only does Lehi prophesy about the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile of its people, and the return of the captives to “the land of their inheritance” (1 Nephi 10:2–3), but he also goes on to predict the coming of a Messiah within six hundred years, “a Savior of the world,” a “Redeemer of the world” (10:4–6). Additionally, he predicts the coming of a prophet to prepare the way for this Messiah (10:7–10), the slaying of this Messiah, and the reception of “the fulness of the Gospel” by the Gentiles (10:11–15).

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

As the readers make their way from the contents of part 2 of 1 Nephi to part 3, they discover that their high level of expectancy with regard

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

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

The next major section of part 3 focuses almost completely on the preparation and sailing of a ship to the New World. The section

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

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

Though what I have offered is all too short and basic to do justice to the more detailed and painstaking literary analysis offered by Grant in his *Understanding*, it does, I think, suggest ways in which a more restrictive narrative analysis is less interested in discerning the narrator's editorial motives with regard to inclusion and exclusion of hypothetical materials available to him and more interested in characterization in a less imagined way.<sup>4</sup> In short, the characterization of Nephi in 1 Nephi relates to his own development into a Spirit-inspired spokesperson like his father Lehi, makes clear that he was especially chosen for and responsive to this calling, indicates the ways in which he stands apart from the murmuring lifestyle and dispositions of his brothers Laman

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4. Of course, none of this should be taken to imply that Grant's work is devoid of such less imaginative characterization studies, for in point of fact his work is replete with numerous such rich analyses.

and Lemuel, and demonstrates Nephi's unique qualifications to lead those faithful to God in the New World. On such a reading, Nephi's editorial motives do not seem to raise to the level of much narrative importance and in some ways might be seen as a distraction from the text's primary emphasis.

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

### Concluding reflections and appreciations

In conclusion, let there be no mistake that I consider Grant's *Understanding the Book of Mormon* to be the most significant, thoroughgoing, literary analysis of the Book of Mormon to date. He succeeds in drawing attention to the literary aspects and characteristics of the Book of Mormon, while facilitating honest, vigorous, and sustainable conversations between Mormon and non-Mormon readers and scholars on the actual contents of the book. In my estimation, this exceptional monograph

is destined to be at the center of Book of Mormon studies for years—perhaps decades—to come, as the book’s literary and theological content continues to receive more attention by both insiders and outsiders. If one can read only one book on the Book of Mormon, this might very well be the one. Book of Mormon studies have advanced enormously with the appearance of Grant Hardy’s work. As a relative newcomer to the discipline, I for one say thanks to Grant for this gift. I look forward to continued conversations with him about the book and to the continued academic contributions from this groundbreaking scholar.

**John Christopher Thomas** (PhD, University of Sheffield) is Clarence J. Abbott Professor of Biblical Studies at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee, and Director of the Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies in the School of Philosophy and Religion at Bangor University in Bangor, Wales, United Kingdom.