

A Book of Mormon for the Ages

Grant Hardy, ed. *The Annotated Book of Mormon*.
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Reviewed by Russell Arben Fox

For intellectually inclined, scripture-studying Mormons of a particular age, the path of Book of Mormon scholarship has been fairly straightforward. In the second half of the twentieth century, there was the work of Hugh Nibley, which defended the text's historical validity and prophetic value through Old World cultural comparisons; then came the writings of John L. Sorenson, who again focused on its historical and cultural plausibility, this time by setting it against New World archaeology and geography. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, studies of the Book of Mormon made a theological turn, exemplified by the work of Terryl L. Givens, launching an approach to reading the text as a distinctly American scripture that engaged the same range of philosophical concerns found in the whole long history of biblical reflection. Thus, over my lifetime as a fifty-six-year-old non-expert follower of religious debates, the historical, cultural, and the theological angles of Book of Mormon reflection have been well covered.

What has been missing, though, was a *literary* approach to reading the text. Not that this has been entirely absent; throughout the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, literary appropriations from and invocations of different parts of the Book of Mormon's narrative have been fairly common. But reading the Book of Mormon specifically as one would analyze any other narrative, looking to understand the writerly or editorial intentions behind it, and developing interpretations that work from within the presented text itself—that has had a very minor place in the history of Book of Mormon scholarship. Until Grant Hardy came along, that is.

A scholar of world religions and religious texts at the University of North Carolina, Hardy has been working consistently for more than twenty years to bring forward his literary take on what used to be regularly called the “keystone” of Mormon belief. As a climax to these decades of work, he has published *The Annotated Book of Mormon*, the complete text of the Book of Mormon in the format of the study bibles and critical editions of great works of literature that pedants like myself have been absorbing all our lives. And speaking for myself, the book is marvelous—I might even say, if this doesn’t date me too much, a marvelous work and a wonder.

Using the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon’s text, which is in the public domain, Hardy has structured the text with paragraphs, quotation marks, poetic stanzas, indentations, and assorted headings, all to make the reading of its often convoluted narrative more comprehensible. By so doing, Hardy has made visible the literary parallels, editorial breaks, shifts in perspective, historically revealing inconsistencies, and more, which too often have eluded even the closest readers of the text. His extensive introductions to the major demarcations in the book (the small plates of Nephi, as the editorial creation of Nephi; the large plates of Nephi, as the editorial creation of Mormon; and the additional material added by Mormon’s son Moroni), as well as to each individual Book of Mormon book, plus the lengthy general essays, appendices, glossaries, and indices found at the book’s conclusion are all very much worth reading, as they point out and reflect upon genre interpretations, narrative connections, literary constructions, alternative reading approaches (as literature, as fiction, as world scripture, etc.), and much more. But most fundamentally, I think it is Hardy’s hundreds upon hundreds of explanatory footnotes, all of which bring new illumination to verses that many of us know well, that matter most of all. Consider a few samples, going from more specific to more general:

1 Nephi 2:15: “*My father dwelt in a tent*, a narrative detail that appears three more times in 1 Ne (9.1; 10.16; 16.6), always in the context of

providing additional instruction regarding newly received revelation. It may be an allusion to the ‘tent of meeting’ (KJV: ‘tent of the congregation’) mentioned 34 times in Ex. This name of the Tabernacle emphasizes its role as a place of revelation, where the Israelites or the representatives met God.” (17)

Alma 7:7–8: “Despite the preeminent importance of the Incarnation, Alma does not know whether the Redeemer will visit the Nephites in his mortal body, and he seems unaware of Nephi’s prophecies of a precise timeline and details of a post-resurrection visitation in the New World (1 Ne 10.4; 12.1–12; 19.8–11; 2 Ne 25.19; 26.1–9). Because 1–2 Ne was dictated after 3 Ne (which included an account of Christ’s appearance among the Nephites), some have taken this as evidence that at the time JS dictated the book of Alma, he was still working out the plot of the BoM. Alternatively, it may be that Alma had not yet read the Small Plates—which were intended for the Lamanites (Jarom 1.2). In either case, Alma later comes to understand that Christ will indeed come among the Nephites after his resurrection (Alma 16.20).” (328)

Helaman 12: “The Nephite/Lamanite decline from righteousness to wickedness in just five years (11.24–38) prompts Mormon to conclude the original ch. IV with a lengthy lament about human nature. This is the clearest exposition of the worldview of the BoM’s primary narrator, whose pessimistic tone seems to be colored not just by his reading of historical records, but by his own experience living through the destruction, degradation, and iniquity that characterized the end of Nephite civilization. Mormon will interweave into his lament allusions to the ministries of Nephi2 and Samuel the Lamanite, related on either side of this editorial insertion.” (540)

These three, and many more like them, make clear a few of Hardy’s central assumptions:

First, he takes very seriously the relationship which the text of the Book of Mormon has to that of the Bible, both in terms of the influence the writings of the Hebrew prophets had upon what became the Nephite’s religious tradition (primarily via the brass plates), but also through revelations recorded by Nephite prophets which reinterpreted and applied some of those prophetic teachings.

Second, he approaches the Book of Mormon as one who believes rather straightforwardly in the official received accounts of its translation and production: that is, he really does believe there were Nephites, and so he is fascinated to better understand these people through the records of them we have, particularly the way those records teach us about the Book of Mormon's three primary editorial voices—Nephi (self-confident as a youth, later bookish and insular, with familial regrets and personal realizations shaping how he presented his early history), Mormon (an ambitious editor, firm in his embrace of various Nephite patriots and prejudices, but always mournfully conscious of the tragedy which they enabled), and Moroni (a reluctant editor, thinking solely of a future he will not see, Christianizing an ancient Jaredite document to emphasize his father's belief that all of humanity will face the same, ultimate divine judgment).

Third, he approaches the Book of Mormon with a sense that its authors and compilers were, like him, thinking about what messages they had to share in a *literary* way: they were, that is, writers and transcribers and recordkeepers, deeply concerned with the preservation of the crucial truths which the words of prophets—and, ultimately, the words of Jesus Christ Himself—contained. In the *Annotated Book of Mormon*, the concern shown by Book of Mormon figures with preserving truth in the face of pluralism and dissent, in the midst of constant fears over lost records or misunderstood traditions, is an echo of the diligent, necessary work which Hardy has committed himself to here.

As a reader and believer (however heterodox) who is looking at the final third of my life, this remarkable accomplishment seems to fit my spiritual mood marvelously well. Historiographic and theological polemics have become less engaging to me, whereas understanding better the stories I have inherited—which in turn show me people trying to hold on to, sometimes losing, but always striving to recover or preserve, their own stories of faith and hope—have become more so. Thus for me, Hardy's project is a wonderful further scholarly step. It makes possible a reading, an interpreting, and a critiquing of this

keystone text that puts us (as it puts, in my imagination, Hardy himself) in the same position as the prophet Mormon in the old Arnold Friberg painting: sitting alone, surrounded by records (as Hardy surrounds us with a footnotes and references), reading and making notes, trying to see a story, which includes one's own story, through to its conclusion. I've owned many copies of the Book of Mormon in my life, but I know this is one that I will stick with until the end.

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Devotional Approaches to the Academic Study of the Bible and Book of Mormon

Charles Swift and Nicholas J. Frederick, eds. *They Shall Grow Together: The Bible in the Book of Mormon*. Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2022. xxii + 500 pp. Hardcover: \$29.99. ISBN: 9781950304301.

Reviewed by Colby Townsend

This collection of essays is the fourth volume in the Book of Mormon Academy Series from the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University. Earlier volumes focused on Abinadi, Ether and the Jaredite records, and Samuel the Lamanite. This volume brings together fifteen