

*The Annotated Book of Mormon*  
Edited by Grant Hardy

New York: Oxford University Press, 2023

Reviewed by Joshua M. Sears

Grant Hardy's *The Annotated Book of Mormon* shares its literary DNA with four previous works. Hardy's first take on a specialized Book of Mormon edition was *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, published by the University of Illinois Press in 2003.<sup>1</sup> It reformatted the text so that poetry was presented in poetic stanzas, and prose text appeared in paragraphs with the punctuation modernized (most notably by including quotation marks).<sup>2</sup> Section headings helped readers easily navigate literary units. Footnotes were used sparingly and identified dates, the source of quotations, narrative threads, and the locations of original chapter breaks.<sup>3</sup> Appendices provided statements from Joseph Smith and other witnesses to the Book of Mormon, as well as charts, maps, background essays, and suggestions for further reading. One drawback of the *Reader's Edition* was its use of the 1920 Book of Mormon text,

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1. See Kevin L. Barney, "An Elegant Presentation," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 1–10.

2. Although the Book of Mormon was published with paragraphs in 1830, official Church editions since 1879 have followed the King James Version (KJV) by inserting verse numbers and using a verse-centric paragraphing system. Quotation marks as a means of representing direct speech had not yet been invented when the KJV was published in 1611, and they remain absent in standard KJV Bibles to this day—another feature that all official Church editions of the Book of Mormon, as well as most nonofficial editions, have emulated.

3. The Book of Mormon's original chapter system was part of the inspired translation and apparently reflects literary divisions marked on the gold plates. The current chapter system was introduced by Elder Orson Pratt in 1879. See Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 80–91. Modern Book of Mormon scholars have made the case that the original system more accurately represents the Book of Mormon's literary structure as its ancient authors intended it, which is why Hardy's editions include the old system alongside the now-standard Orson Pratt system.

which differs from the Church's current edition in some 150 places but has the advantage of being in the public domain.

The deep engagement with the Book of Mormon required to create the *Reader's Edition* led to Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*, published by Oxford University Press in 2010.<sup>4</sup> Like his first book, this volume addressed readers who do not share Hardy's Latter-day Saint faith in the Book of Mormon as inspired scripture, but Hardy made the case that the Book of Mormon is still worth their serious attention both as literature and as world scripture.<sup>5</sup> Because *Understanding the Book of Mormon* is an academic publication addressed to a diverse audience, it is nondogmatic in its approach to historical questions (such as the existence of an actual Nephi) and explains how any given literary feature might be understood either by believers or nonbelievers.<sup>6</sup>

Hardy's second publication of the full Book of Mormon text was *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ—Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (MISE), published jointly in 2018 by BYU's Religious Studies Center, BYU's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, and Deseret Book.<sup>7</sup> The MISE is an updated *Reader's Edition*—the headings, formatting, footnotes, and appendices are all improved. The original chapter breaks are moved from the footnotes to the body text, and

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4. See "Understanding *Understanding the Book of Mormon*: An Interview with Grant Hardy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 25 (2016): 20–36. Hardy also explains how creating the *Reader's Edition* prepared him to write *Understanding the Book of Mormon* on pp. xiv–xv, xix of the latter.

5. For a reaction from a non-Latter-day Saint scholar, see John Christopher Thomas, "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* 25 (2016): 93–115. For an analysis of how *Understanding the Book of Mormon* has impacted the academic study of the Book of Mormon, see Kimberly Matheson, "Emboldened and Embarrassed: The Tenor of Contemporary Book of Mormon Studies and the Role of Grant Hardy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 31 (2022): 75–99.

6. Daniel C. Peterson, "An Apologetically Important Nonapologetic Book," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 25 (2016): 52–75, observes that even though *Understanding the Book of Mormon* does not actively try to persuade readers to accept the Book of Mormon as authentic ancient American scripture, the literary complexity that Hardy documents can very much be interpreted by believers as a confirmation of the Book of Mormon's historical claims.

7. See Blair Dee Hodges, "A Marvelous New Book of Mormon Study Edition," *BYU Religious Education Review* (Fall 2018): 12–15, 33. See also Grant Hardy and Brian Kershnik, "Illuminating the Book of Mormon: A New Edition for the Twenty-First Century," in *2019 Annual Report* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2020), 14–33.

the footnotes are expanded with additional literary and narrative observations as well as alternative readings from Book of Mormon prepublication manuscripts. Thanks to Church copyright permission, the 1920 text was replaced with the Church's 2013 text, allowing the MISE to match the official version. But the most significant change from the *Reader's Edition* is that the MISE is written for believing Latter-day Saints, so its notes and appendices explicitly present a position of faith.<sup>8</sup>

The final work in *The Annotated Book of Mormon's* ancestry is *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, edited by Michael Coogan and published by Oxford University Press. The *Annotated Bible* (in its fifth edition as of 2018) is the flagship Bible in OUP's study-Bible line and includes denominational variations, such as *The Catholic Study Bible* and *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. *The Annotated Book of Mormon* is also published by Oxford's Bible division and is in fact the first non-Bible in its history. Although *The Annotated Book of Mormon* is a refinement of the format Hardy has been perfecting since the *Reader's Edition*, this new work also takes many of its visual and organizational cues from the *Annotated Bible* (as their similar titles are meant to suggest). These include introductions to each individual book, a series of essays in the appendix that examine the text from different angles, and a dense block of footnotes at the bottom of each page where the word or phrase under discussion is highlighted in italics.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, one may think of *The Annotated Book of Mormon* as a combination of all four previous works: it includes the user-friendly format of the *Reader's Edition* and the MISE, the interpretive insights and outward-facing scholarship of *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, and the visual style and prestige of the Oxford study Bibles. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* remains an invaluable stand-alone resource for its in-depth analysis, but the *Reader's Edition* is now effectually obsolete, having no benefits over this new successor. Unfortunately, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* could not secure the copyright agreement that allowed the MISE to use the Church's 2013 text, so it reverts to the 1920 text used in the *Reader's Edition*, leaving the MISE with that advantage. The MISE also remains unique with its Latter-day Saint target audience.

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8. See Joshua M. Sears, review of *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ—Maxwell Institute Study Edition*, ed. Grant Hardy, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 29 (2020): 264–72.

9. As with the *Annotated Bible*, technical information about the text, such as alternative readings, are presented under the body text but above the main block of interpretive footnotes (the MISE had included this information among the footnotes).

A primary audience for *The Annotated Book of Mormon* is those outside the faith, especially those who are academically minded (that is, people who read the kinds of things published by Oxford). These readers may be willing to engage with the Book of Mormon, not necessarily because they are exploring conversion but at least because they are willing to learn more. Hardy identifies himself in the introduction as “a believer” and describes his role as “a host (I hope a gracious one) in inviting outsiders to see how the narrative operates, how it makes its points, and to gain some sense of the book’s message and why believers have found it so compelling” (x). Conscious of readers who do not accept Joseph Smith’s story of ancient American plates and angelic messengers, Hardy’s footnotes and essays will sometimes explain how a Book of Mormon passage was relevant in the nineteenth century, which is where these readers might assume the text originates, or will explain how the Book of Mormon could be seen as religious fiction. Because this is a primer on the Book of Mormon, not the Church, the annotations as a rule explain what the Book of Mormon says without exploring how a given idea may have developed among Latter-day Saints since 1830.<sup>10</sup>

Some Latter-day Saints may be uncomfortable with a Book of Mormon edition that is not designed for religious conversion. Given that the Book of Mormon self-identifies as a missionary tool, an academic intent can seem like a betrayal of its purpose. However, I can appreciate the value of this approach when I consider the times I have been on the other side of the equation. For example, when I as a Christian want to enhance my understanding of Islam by reading a study edition of the Quran, my preference would be to read something edited by Muslims. I want them to explain the Quran and why they love it so much. At the same time, because I do not share their religious faith, I would appreciate them being honest about the Quran’s complexities and controversies. Were their work designed only to convert me, I honestly would not read it. And although I respect their view of the Quran’s inspiration, I would also want the Muslim editors to suggest how a nonbeliever such as myself might think about the Quran’s origin and nature. A volume such as HarperOne’s *The Study Quran* (2015) succeeds as a literary ambassador because it checks all these boxes and helps me feel comfortable

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10. There are a few places where Hardy breaks this rule, which I am grateful for. For example, the annotation for 2 Nephi 5:21 clarifies that, despite what readers might assume based on the scriptural text, “The current LDS Church disavows any connection between dark skin and curses.” At Moroni 9:9, it explains, “The LDS Church today disavows the notion that virtue or chastity can be lost through rape or abuse.”

learning about the Quran as a reader who is curious to learn but not interested in becoming a Muslim. *The Annotated Book of Mormon* fills this role for the Book of Mormon. While it does not expressly invite its readers to come to Jesus, it does allow curious readers to engage with our founding scripture in a serious yet nonpushy way. If this creates space for more people to read the Book of Mormon than would otherwise happen, then I consider that a win.

In addition, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* presents the world with a Book of Mormon that *looks* like it deserves serious engagement as a scriptural text. More than a century ago, Church editors worked hard to change the Book of Mormon's originally novel-like format so that it matched what readers expected scripture to look like in the King James Version (KJV). To that end, chapters were shortened, verse numbers were added, and new paragraphs began with each verse. While that may have been a savvy missionary-minded move at the time, official Book of Mormon editions since then continue to emulate the KJV while ignoring the fact that the Bible moved on. Today, virtually all translations (including special editions of the KJV) arrange prose narrative into paragraphs and display poetry in poetic stanzas. Verse numbers are shrunk to superscripts to make them visually unobtrusive, and the chapter breaks (invented in the medieval era and often placed in intrusive locations) are deemphasized in favor of section headings marking natural literary divisions. These developments are universally adopted because this format makes the Bible far easier to read. (To anyone who doubts this, I challenge you to read anything other than scripture in a format where a new paragraph begins every sentence or half-sentence and see if that doesn't ruin the experience.) Furthermore, serious students of the Bible today are accustomed to engaging with the text in a study Bible format, where the bottom half of each page is packed with dense annotations reflecting a rich history of biblical interpretation.<sup>11</sup> Official editions of the Book of Mormon, by contrast, are still printed with verse-centric paragraphing that obscures the natural contours of the narrative. The footnotes primarily consist of cross-references or point to the Topical Guide. These references perform their intended function of signaling that the Book of Mormon is a companion to the Bible,<sup>12</sup> but their ability to help readers

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11. See Joshua M. Sears, "Study Bibles: An Introduction for Latter-day Saints," *Religious Educator* 20, no. 3 (2019): 27–57.

12. The editors of the 1979 Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible and its companion volume, the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon, described this signaling as one of the primary benefits of the cross references. See *That Promised Day: The Coming Forth of the*

dive deep into the Book of Mormon's meaning is limited, particularly since most of them point to other passages whose relationship to the starting passage is merely thematic. By contrast, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* reimagines the Book of Mormon in the format of a modern Bible translation like the NRSV, inviting outside readers to *see* the Book of Mormon in the way they expect biblical scripture to look. And since the notes elucidate the text in the manner of a study Bible, they communicate that this text has received, and continues to deserve, serious study. All of this aids *The Annotated Book of Mormon* in its role as an ambassador to readers outside the Latter-day Saint faith.

Of course, this book will also find an audience among Latter-day Saints. Given the academic publisher, I was initially concerned that Oxford would mandate a strictly secular editorial approach (“No angels or gold plates allowed here!”). I was therefore pleased to find that Hardy was permitted to take the stance of a believer: “I believe the Book of Mormon is [a] gift from God, a revealed translation of a record written by ancient American prophets” (xi). Instead of taking some posture of objectivity, Hardy says that he has *not* “adopted a disinterested, neutral stance” and admits that while attempting to treat the complex issues honestly, he has also consciously “emphasized the book’s strengths” (x). Because of this framing, the annotations on each page adopt the perspective of the Book of Mormon’s own internal point of view (“Nephi sees . . .”) rather than create some way to distance the text from reality (“Joseph Smith claimed that Nephi saw . . .”). Outsiders are welcome to interpret this perspective through a literary lens (“Within the narrative, the character of Nephi sees . . .”), but the notes will feel most natural to believers who are accustomed to thinking of Book of Mormon authors as real people. On the occasions where the notes do present a nineteenth-century connection for the benefit of readers outside the faith, Latter-day Saint readers can interpret these data in alternative ways, such as assuming that ancient prophets wrote under inspiration in a way that made the book relevant during the time of its future translation.

While the book introductions, annotations, and essays are written to welcome first-time readers outside the faith, this does not mean they

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*LDS Scriptures*, a documentary originally aired on October 3, 2010, available at BYUtV, <https://www.byutv.org/495be0e6-f235-464a-b971-00f6b9597809/that-promised-day-that-promised-day>. The 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon introduced the subtitle *Another Testament of Jesus Christ* as yet another way of signaling this connection. See Turley and Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon*, 113–14.

are simplistic.<sup>13</sup> Hardy is one of our most important Book of Mormon scholars, and even the most experienced Book of Mormon readers will learn much from this edition. That being said, I anticipate that invested students of the Book of Mormon will not agree with every annotation or editorial decision. In a volume of 892 pages and thousands of notes, some annotations will inevitably miss an important insight or make an observation that the reader finds flawed. Also worth observing is the book's univocality, with Hardy functioning as the only named editor and as the only named author of the annotations and essays. Were this edition written by another individual, or were it produced by a team of scholars (which is standard in Oxford's other scripture editions), the book would undoubtedly read very differently. Still, whatever limitations are inherent to a one-man project of such an audacious scope, the quality of the final product is truly remarkable. I could quibble about notes I would have written differently, but overall, I have difficulty imagining a better edition to serve as the Book of Mormon's ambassador to the scholarly world.

No one edition of the Book of Mormon can serve the needs of all people. For our family scripture study, I will still pass out copies of the MISE to my kids. For those who want interactive videos, reading schedules, and links to online content, an app like ScripturePlus will still be their first choice. For sharing copies of the Book of Mormon in bulk, nothing beats the Church's inexpensive missionary edition. But for those who want to dive deep and appreciate the Book of Mormon's literary complexity and doctrinal richness in new ways, I heartily recommend this book.

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13. The General Essays alone span ninety-four pages and cover a diverse range of topics, including the origin of the text, the Book of Mormon's relationship to the Bible, how Latter-day Saints use and understand the Book of Mormon, ways in which people have read the Book of Mormon as either ancient history or fiction, and an annotated bibliography for further study.