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To Really Read the Book of Mormon

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TO REALLY READ THE BOOK OF MORMON

Ralph C. Hancock

Review of Grant Hardy. Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. xix + 346 pp., with index. \$29.95.

Grant Hardy, chair of the history department at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, studied Chinese history at Yale and clearly has read a lot of ancient texts with the greatest care. Somewhere along the line, he learned to really read a text: to savor it, to interrogate it, to listen to every voice, to compare and contrast, to hear resonances of one voice in another, and, not least, to hear silences. We are all fortunate that he has not limited the employment of his finely honed textual skills to his academic specialty. We thought we were reading the Book of Mormon all along, but it turns out we weren't yet really reading it—not in this full sense, not with this loving attention, this openness to possibilities, this exposed humanity.

The key to Hardy's basic strategy is to take seriously the authorship of the Book of Mormon, not by Joseph Smith (although Hardy allows skeptics to hold on to that assumption), nor simply and immediately by God (though Hardy is in no way inclined to slight faithful readings), but by those who are the principal authors according to the book itself: Nephi, Mormon, Moroni. The result of trusting what the book says about its own composition and keeping the key authors in mind relentlessly, meticulously, and with a human sensitivity that can only come from openness to the humanity we share with the authors, is,

well, a revelation. Hardy's reading of the Book of Mormon is in a way more religious than any other because it is more rational—that is, by allowing natural questions to arise and to resonate, he reveals characters to us (especially the three authors) that are more miraculous because they are more human. Hardy has read the Book of Mormon with fresh eyes, as if it were just what it purports to be—a text with multiple, inter-related human authors with deeply human concerns that are partly shared and partly distinctive of each individual author. And now we too can start again in our journey of understanding the Book of Mormon, but thanks to Grant Hardy, we can start miles ahead of where we were.

Here I can give only the slightest sample of the revelatory moments and rich suggestions with which Hardy's book is rife. Let me focus on some high points of his deft exploration of the character of Nephi, which is what I found most moving in the whole book. Hardy shows what I think I had sensed but had not clearly seen, namely, that “there is an undercurrent of grief and weariness that runs throughout his writings. Nephi certainly affirms that he was blessed by the Lord, but it may not always have been in ways he expected or desired.” To be sure, Hardy's reflections on Nephi's personal travails are some of the most speculative in the book, relying at critical points on puzzling silences we probably hadn't even noticed, though he does not present them as the only possible readings. Central to Hardy's reading is the observation that “Nephi's blessing [under the hands of Lehi] is conspicuous for its absence, despite his admission that Lehi ‘had spoken to all his household’ and precedents in the Hebrew Bible” (p. 51). This leads Hardy to some most penetrating wondering about what might have been Nephi's fondest hopes and dreams, a wondering that is possible only because Hardy opens his heart to Nephi's humanity, especially Nephi's condition as a father. Then he brings this deeply

human Nephi back to his reception of the vision of the tree of life and to the prophecies that follow this vision.

What Hardy can then hear in the text is a Nephi who “is using these scriptural interpretations to assuage deep personal frustrations and resolve theological difficulties that he only hints at in his narrative. Clearly, there is an active mind at work here, one that is colored by his experiences, his sense of audience, and his desire for order” (p. 51). Showing a fine rhetorical gift himself, Hardy saves the clinching punch line for the end of part 1 (which deals with Nephi’s authorship). I will not give away his stirring conclusion, except to say that it turns on Nephi’s very personal answer to the Spirit’s very personal question in 1 Nephi 11:2: “What desirest thou?” To understand Nephi’s answer to this question in the light of what we can know about Nephi from what he says, and even more from what he does not say, is already to understand the Book of Mormon as never before. It is also to honor Nephi more than ever as a prophet because we can now truly love, admire, and commune with him as a human being.

You can see that this reader has found Hardy’s presentation of the soul of the first great Book of Mormon author so deep, so poignant, and so compelling that I’m sure I will never read Nephi’s voice again without hearing Hardy’s questions and suggestions. Despite its sometimes speculative character, Hardy’s reading connects so many dots at such a deep level that I do not see how he could not be on to something vitally important. And the effect is similar in the cases of Mormon and Moroni, which I will leave to the reader to discover.

Some Latter-day Saint readers may be put off by the stance of “objectivity” that Hardy adopts regarding the origins and status of the Book of Mormon. Clearly he wishes to remove all possible barriers to entry at the outset by inviting all comers—believers and nonbelievers, those moved by intellectual curiosity and professional discipline as much as those seeking divine

guidance or the confirmation of testimony. He is content to *defer* (but not to suppress or forget) “questions of ultimate significance until we better understand the text and how it operates” (p. 4). He is also content to examine the book as “a human artifact” that “draws on the same narrative tools used by both novelists and historians” (p. 9). This he does without denying that the book can also be more than simply a human artifact.

The most prominent and underappreciated feature of the book as a human artifact is that “its basic structure is derived from the three narrators” (p. 10). But Hardy also notices (how could one not?), though he doesn’t insist, that “this is a book designed to polarize readers, and subtlety about its central message is not among its virtues” (p. 9). Indeed, the great question by the Book of Mormon (in its very last verse, for example) finally interpellates each of us is how we will be doing when we meet Moroni and, presumably, the book’s other primary authors “before the pleasing bar of the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead” (Moroni 10:34). Just where the eventual “polarization” on this great question stands in relation to the various interests and incentives that different readers bring to Grant Hardy’s book is a question Professor Hardy is content to let arise by its own force.

In his afterword, Hardy shows himself to be the same master of understatement he has been throughout the whole book, at least concerning the implications of his reading for the unavoidable religious and existential question it raises. Turning Mark Twain’s joke about Wagner’s music against Twain’s own clueless dismissal of the Book of Mormon, he writes: “It is better than it sounds.” I’ll say it is. And for me, after reading Hardy, it will never sound the same again.

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