

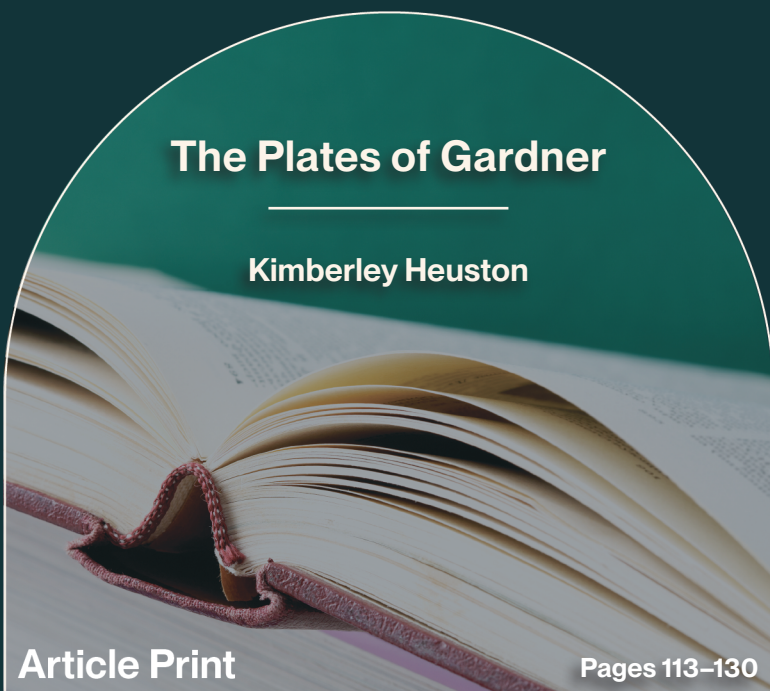
# Interpreter

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## **The Plates of Gardner**

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**Kimberley Heuston**



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# The Plates of Gardner

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Kimberley Heuston

*Review of Brant A. Gardner, The Plates of Mormon: A Book of Mormon Study Edition, and its companion volume, Engraven Upon Plates, Printed Upon Paper: Textual and Narrative Structures of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2023). Study edition 598 pp.; \$34.95 (paperback). Commentary 485 pp.; \$24.95 (paperback).*

**Abstract:** *This paper addresses the reasons for a recent spurt in Book of Mormon study editions and contextualizes the unique contributions of Brant Gardner's The Plates of Mormon: A Book of Mormon Study Edition. Unlike other study editions, which cater to the needs of believing Church members, prospective missionaries, or the (secular) scholarly community, Gardner writes that The Plates of Mormon is an attempt to understand the book in terms of the ancient Mesoamerican culture that produced it, something for which he, a trained Mesoamericanist, is uniquely qualified. To do so, he must first peel away the layers superimposed upon its current version by Joseph Smith's translation for his Early American frontier community. That complicated process is detailed in a companion volume, Engraven Upon Plates, Printed Upon Paper: Textual and Narrative Structures of the Book of Mormon, which receives the bulk of this review's attention. Gardner's discoveries and conclusions are briefly rather than comprehensively summarized in this review.*

"Keep an open mind — but not so open that your brains fall out."

—Alan Garner

Thanks to Royal Skousen as well as the Joseph Smith Papers (JSP), interested readers now have ready access to high-resolution facsimiles of the original dictated manuscripts of the Book of Mormon.<sup>1</sup> Those facsimiles, in concert with the thorough and historically sensitive editorial notes of Skousen and the JSP, would seem to provide definitive answers about the provenance of the Book of Mormon.<sup>2</sup> However, neither the 25% that remains of the original manuscript nor the virtually complete printer's manuscript, which was copied for use by John Gilbert, the Book of Mormon's typesetter, include modern-day conventions like punctuation and line and paragraph breaks. Although Gilbert did a fine job of creating order out of the string of text he was given, in recent years several editors have used the newly available facsimiles and Skousen's research to inform new study versions of the Book of Mormon. Brant Gardner's *The Plates of Mormon* takes its place next to Grant Hardy's *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*;<sup>3</sup> Lynn and David Rosenvall's *A New Approach to Studying the*

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1. Unfortunately, more than 75% of the original manuscript, which is to say the original longhand transcription of Joseph's dictated translation, was lost to water damage and dispersal in the years after Joseph Smith deposited it in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House. Fortunately, all but three lines of the printers manuscript, a copy of the original made for John Gilbert, the Book of Mormon's first printer, have survived. High-definition facsimiles of both may be found online at the "Book of Mormon Manuscripts," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, [josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr3](https://josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr3). The commentaries on that website as well as Royal Skousen's *The Earliest Text of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022) are products of The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, which Royal Skousen oversaw for nearly forty years. The Interpreter Foundation hosts the online version of Skousen's six volume *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, the predecessor to *The Earliest Text*, at [interpreterfoundation.org/books/atv/](https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/atv/).
  2. These include the first edition published in Palmyra in 1830; the 1837 Kirtland Edition, which included approximately 1,000 editorial corrections authorized by Joseph Smith, most of which were grammatical; the 1840 Nauvoo Edition, which included a few more corrections authorized by Joseph Smith and restored a few verses inadvertently omitted in earlier editions; the 1879 edition, which broke longer chapters and verses into shorter, narratively cohesive passages; the 1920 edition, which broke the text into two columns and introduced chapter summaries; and the currently used 1981 edition, which includes revised indexes and a Topical Guide. Because the Church prefers to be the sole provider of the current edition, all of the study versions are based on the 1920 edition.
  3. Grant Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

*Book of Mormon*;<sup>4</sup> Hardy's Maxwell Institute study edition;<sup>5</sup> and his more comprehensive *Annotated Book of Mormon*.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these study versions is well-suited to a particular audience. Hardy's *Study Edition* was designed to prepare prospective missionaries seeking a deeper understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ's foundational book of scripture. The Rosenvalls' version uses formatting and speaker attributions to clarify the immediate context of passages for readers overwhelmed by the Book of Mormon's sometimes dense text, varied narratives, and frequent flashbacks. Hardy's *Annotated Book of Mormon* is designed for an academic audience both in and out of the LDS community, as its publication by Oxford suggests.

Gardner's *Plates of Mormon* differs from the others in that it, like the book it reveals, is unabashedly *sui generis*. As he wrote in the introduction to his *Second Witness* commentary on the Book of Mormon, Gardner is interested in constructing "a cohesive picture of the Book of Mormon text and peoples" based on the text itself and its archaeological and cultural contexts:

I inquire into the process of Joseph Smith's translation or how the text fits into the ancient Old and New Worlds. *I do not attempt to prove or disprove it but to understand it.* Regardless of the value for our day and the obvious fact that it came forth in our day, it was not written in our day, nor in our language, nor in our culture. . . . This commentary attempts to read the text in the light of that ancient production culture and mentality.<sup>7</sup>

Because Gardner's emphasis is on understanding the text on its own terms rather than categorizing or shaping it to the needs of a particular audience, his *Plates of Mormon* is, insofar as is possible for

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4. Lynn and David Rosenvall, *A New Approach to Studying the Book of Mormon* (n.p.: Olive Leaf Foundation, 2017).

5. Grant Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, Maxwell Institute Study Edition (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018).

6. Grant Hardy, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

7. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Volume 1: First Nephi* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 7, emphasis added.

complex and carefully reasoned argument, an open book, the functional equivalent of a WYSIWYG software interface.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, transparency is not the same thing as simplicity. Consider the complexities at work in excavating the “true message” of a collection of histories, letters, and sermons created millennia ago by a series of cultures that today are incompletely understood; edited in the fourth century by a soldier named Mormon and his son and successor, Moroni, in the midst of the utter destruction of their culture and people; and then shorn of the first half of Mormon’s abridgement in the early nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> And that is *without* addressing the thorny questions of the divine provenance the plates claim for themselves or the mechanism by which their uneducated and unlikely caretaker rendered an English translation of the same, complete with quotations of biblical texts that had not yet been composed in their original Greek or Hebrew.<sup>10</sup>

That’s a lot of moving parts for anyone to keep track of, and it explains why Gardner required a companion volume and commentary—*Engraven Upon Plates, Printed Upon Paper*—to elucidate, as completely as possible, the “textual and narrative strategies” at work in the Book of Mormon as it was originally written and edited, independent of Joseph Smith’s later translation.

Gardner is uniquely positioned to offer such an analysis. While there is no dearth of excellent recent scholarship on the Book of Mormon, most of it has come from scholars whose professional training took place in adjacent fields.<sup>11</sup> Gardner is one of the only gospel-facing

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8. WYSIWYG stands for “What you see is what you get.” It refers to a computer interface where output matches input. In other words, what you see as you input information matches what you will see when it is published.

9. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 83.

10. Joseph Smith’s only explanation of the process was that the Book of Mormon was “translated by the power of God.” Kent P. Jackson and Peter M. Jasinski, “The Process of Inspired Translation: Two Passages Translated Twice in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2003): 61, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol42/iss2/3](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol42/iss2/3).

11. Hugh Nibley studied the classics at Berkeley, while *Interpreter*’s own Dan Peterson pursued Arabic studies at UCLA. Richard Bushman and Noel Reynolds earned PhDs from Harvard, where Bushman studied colonial America and Reynolds studied political science. Grant Hardy studied Chinese history at Yale and John Welch is an attorney. Adam Miller, Joseph Spencer, and Mark Wrathall are philosophers by training, while Terryl Givens’s graduate work emphasized literature.

scholars who is also a trained Mesoamericanist.<sup>12</sup> From the beginning, that training and the career that followed was laser-focused on the intersection of Mesoamerican language, environment, and culture with the received text of the Book of Mormon. His first publications explored the language, linguistics, and ethno-history of the Book of Mormon's Mesoamerican setting.<sup>13</sup> In 2007 he turned his attention to the Book of Mormon itself with the publication of his six-volume *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, published by Greg Kofford Books, as were *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (2011) and *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (2015). Though many scholars and other Saints have devoted a significant portion of long and productive personal and professional lives to the Book of Mormon, few, if any, have focused so unrelentingly on the context of its original composition and translation.

Like most commentaries, *The Plates of Mormon* and *Engraven upon Plates* offer an exegesis of the Book of Mormon. In other words, they seek to elucidate the meaning of scripture through a careful examination of its written context. The special contribution of Gardner's exegeses is that his two books are informed by literary, cultural, and historical contexts that have been inaccessible to most Book of Mormon scholars. What follows attempts to summarize Gardner's major contributions as outlined in *Engraven upon Plates*.

## The World of Joseph Smith

One early spring morning in 1820, an obscure and mostly unlettered fourteen-year-old farm boy went into the woods of upstate New York to pray for spiritual direction and to ascertain his personal standing before the Lord. When he emerged sometime later, young Joseph

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12. Others include archaeologist John E. Clark, one of the world's foremost experts on the Olmecs, and Allen J. Christenson, whose brilliant 2008 translation and analysis of the *Popul Vuh* now informs nearly every discussion of pre-Columbian Maya culture.

13. These include Brant A. Gardner, "Mecayotl and Mexicayotl: The role of kinships in Nahua Society," (thesis, Brigham Young University, 1975); Gardner et al., *Bibliography of Mayan Languages and Linguistics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York at Albany, 1978); Gardner, "A Structural and Semantic Analysis of Classical Nahuatl Kinship Terminology," *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 15 (1982); and Gardner, Lyle Campbell, and Walter Randolph Adams, *The Linguistics of Southeast Chiapas, Mexico* (Provo, UT: New World Archaeological Foundation, BYU, 1988).

Smith reported an experience so audacious that it broke and reformed the pattern and meaning of his life as well as those of millions of followers yet to come. He said that God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ appeared to him, called him by name, forgave his sins, prophesied the return of the resurrected Christ, warned that none of the churches then on the earth were true, and promised that Joseph would receive the fullness of the gospel at some future date.

As Richard Bushman and others have shown, such experiences were readily comprehensible to early nineteenth-century Americans inhabiting the “burned over” district of upstate New York.<sup>14</sup> For Joseph and his neighbors, the reality of God and the granting of divine manifestations were commonplace. Joseph never doubted the reality of his extraordinary experience and was surprised by the “persecution and reviling” that ensued, declaring that “I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it” (Joseph Smith — History 1:23, 25). Bushman succinctly concludes that “the First Vision fits comfortably into Joseph Smith’s time and place.”<sup>15</sup>

It fit so comfortably that when Joseph felt himself in need of additional divine instruction two and a half years later, he made his request with “full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation, as I previously had one” (Joseph Smith — History 1:29). His confidence paid off on 21 September 1823. This time the divine visitor was Moroni, the son of General Mormon and the final editor of the Book of Mormon. Moroni told Joseph that a sacred record kept by his Nephite forefathers lay buried in one of the region’s drumlin hills, a mile or so from the Smith family homestead.<sup>16</sup> Joseph had no trouble accepting this additional

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14. This was a major theme of “The Worlds of Joseph Smith,” a symposium at the Library of Congress in honor of the bicentennial of Smith’s birth. See John W. Welch, *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress* (Provo, UT: BYU, 2006).

15. The culture that I swam in as a fourteen-year-old lay 300 miles to the southwest and 150 years in the future. As a participant in the world of New York City’s secular elite, the crux of my faith was learning to accept just those possibilities. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith’s Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 8. See also Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 183–204, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss1/10/](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss1/10/); and Bruce W. Northen, “How the Erie Canal Corridor Became the Burned-over District: Rochester and the Advent of Mormonism,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 40, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2020), 48–64.

16. It is not known how the records were transported from the Nephite lands to



information, in part because seer stones that revealed buried treasure were very much a part of his and his community's lived tradition. As historians like Mackay and Dirkmaat have noted:

Those who were most acquainted with Joseph Smith in Palmyra did not doubt he had received the plates but instead took steps to obtain them for themselves or at the very least find remnants of the buried treasure possibly still lying in the hill.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, Joseph Smith's culture prepared him to not only receive the plates of Mormon as the Word of God but also to confidently interact with them by means of a sacred object in ways that ours does not. One of the things it did not prepare him for, as Gardner makes clear, was to confidently and independently translate the Nephite characters into a narrative that early Americans could both comprehend and accept as "a volume of holy scripture comparable to the Bible."<sup>18</sup>

The body of *Engraven Upon Plates* attempts to recover, as nearly as possible, the text of the Book of Mormon as it was originally written, prior to any artifacts introduced by Joseph's translation for the people of his own time and ours. This is a delicate enterprise since the only explicit reference Joseph made to the translation process is simply that "The interpretation thereof [came by] the gift of God."<sup>19</sup> Gardner's analysis establishes that in this case, as in so many others, the divine gift assumed strenuous exertions on the part of its intended recipient.

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the drumlin in Palmyra, New York, that later became known as the Hill Cumorah. It seems reasonable to assume that Moroni himself made the long overland journey and buried them in a stone box that he likely made on site. See Benjamin R. Jordan and Warren P. Aston, "The Geology of Moroni's Stone Box: Examining the Setting and Resources of Palmyra," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 30 (2018): 233–52, [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-geology-of-moronis-stone-box-examining-the-setting-and-resources-of-palmyra/](http://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-geology-of-moronis-stone-box-examining-the-setting-and-resources-of-palmyra/). For the later disposition of the stone box, see Michael Hubbard Mackay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 9–10.

17. Mackay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 10. The first section of Gardner's earlier work *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 3–134; offers the most complete discussion of Joseph's translation of the golden plates in the context of his place and time.

18. From the first sentence of the Introduction to the 2013 authorized version of the Book of Mormon.

19. Title page, *The Book of Mormon*.

Joseph required four additional visions over the course of the next four years before he was fully prepared to receive the physical plates. Even then, Joseph's closest associates—including his wife Emma, his father, and Martin Harris—were dubious about his capability to translate them himself, as he had been commanded.<sup>20</sup> Joseph seems to have agreed with them. According to John Whitmer, Joseph's host during the most concentrated phase of the translation, Joseph originally believed that experts in ancient languages could help get him started:

He now Began to be anxious to git them translated. He therefore with his wife Drew off[f] the Caricters exactly like the ancient and sent Martin Harris to see if he Could git them Translated. He went to Albeny and to Philadelpha and to new york and he found men that Could Translate some of the Carictors in all those places.<sup>21</sup>

But urban intellectuals like Charles Anthon and Samuel Mitchill were not part of the credulous world of the burned over district and proved unwilling or unable to take seriously a faithful enterprise like the translation of a miraculous book. Only after the disappointment of being rejected by intellectuals could Joseph surrender himself to a private partnership with God that an independent translation would require.

### Interpreting the Plates

In the absence of accessible and strenuously argued critiques of Joseph's putative translation process along with resources like the Joseph Smith Papers, earlier generations of Latter-day Saints could afford to elide the nature of the Book of Mormon's translation. Most probably assumed, without much thought, that the Book of Mormon was the product of what Gardner calls "divinely infallible translation." More recently, awareness of textual variants and mistakes (including misspellings and infelicitous syntax) as well as Joseph's pragmatic correction of earlier printed passages in the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon has been growing—all suggesting that the manuscript sent to the printer was not infallible. That was little surprise when it passed

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20. See Gardner, *The Gift and the Power*, 3–5.

21. Quoted in Dean C. Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 17 (1977): 34, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol17/iss1/4/](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol17/iss1/4/).

through the mortal hands of secretaries, an unbelieving printer, and Joseph himself.

In an 1843 letter to the editor of the *Times and Seasons*, Joseph reminded his audience that:

There was no Greek or Latin upon the plates from which I, through the grace of God translated the Book of Mormon. Let the language of that book speak for itself. . . . It reads: "And now behold we have written this record according to our knowledge in the characters, which are called among us the Reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech; and . . . the Hebrew hath been altered by us, also; . . . but the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also, that none other people knoweth our language; therefore he hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof."

Here then the subject is put to silence, for "none other people knoweth our language," [Morm. 9:34], therefore the Lord, and not man, had to interpret the Nephite record.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, then, Joseph did not translate the plates in the way that intermediate students of Hebrew or Greek labor to translate a short homework passage into their native languages. His translation was initiated by divine transmission of the meaning assigned to the characters on the plates by their original writers. At first, Joseph found it easiest to receive this transmission by means of the interpreters, a large spectacle-like device that was buried with the plates, or with one of the two seer stones that he had found and used during his adolescence, as many in his neighborhood did.

(Parenthetically, "dowsers" and other adepts were — and probably still are — routinely consulted in the northern Vermont farming community where I spent my summers as a girl. As a constant witness of the cruel unpredictability of our neighbors' harvests, I could easily understand the comfort that extra-rational talismans and beliefs offered.)

Joseph placed the seer stone in a hat to block out the light and used it to focus on the interpretation he was receiving, though by the time Joseph moved on to later translation projects he had no need of those physical aids.

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22. "Correspondence [Joseph Smith to Editor of the *Times and Seasons*]," *Times and Seasons* 4 (15 May 1843): 194.

Some interested parties have argued that these aids provided a text that Joseph merely needed to read aloud. This is bolstered by several first-person narratives recalling Joseph's careful and specific spelling of unfamiliar names, which were apparently given to him letter-by-letter. However, Gardner's analysis of such recollections establishes that such care was only taken the first time an unfamiliar name appeared.<sup>23</sup>

Instead, Gardner is among a growing number of Book of Mormon scholars who argue that Joseph's mind received revelation as blocks of pre-verbal knowledge — what Gardner refers to as “mentalese.”<sup>24</sup> Joseph then projected or imagined these impressions into being in the form of visions, which he then attempted to describe verbally. Gardner quotes Kathleen Flake's study of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible:

It appears that when he read he saw events, not words. What he saw, he verbalized to a scribe. . . . Arguably, then, ‘translate’ expressed Smith's experience of ‘study[ing] it out in [his mind]’ or his sense of agency in front of the text. Smith did not think of himself as God's stenographer. Rather, he was an interpreting reader, and God the confirming authority.<sup>25</sup>

### Translating for Early American Readers

The Lord began the translation process by transmitting a correct interpretation of the text composed by the original authors to Joseph through revelation. But more work had to be done before the interpretation could become a translation fully comprehensible to its target readers. As Gardner explains,

because the translation's original 1830 audience had virtually nothing in common with the purported original language and culture recorded on the golden plates, what might have been effective communication when the Nephite text was finalized around AD 400 would be less effective with its primary audience fourteen centuries later. . . . [It] required

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23. Gardner, *Engraven Upon Plates*, 7.

24. Gardner, *Engraven Upon Plates*, 62–67. The term *mentalese* was originally coined by Steven Pinker in *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

25. Kathleen Flake, “Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith's Narrative Canon,” *The Journal of Religion* 87 (October 2007), 506–7.

modifications of some sort for the translation to be comprehensible to its first readers.<sup>26</sup>

Joseph's part in the project of translation was to act as an "inter-cultural mediator," framing the divine interpretation of the plates with forms that would signal that the Book of Mormon was indeed a second witness of God to the people of his time and place. To do so, Joseph used the pseudo-biblical language conditioned by the King James version of the Bible that signaled authoritative public discourse in both religious and secular contexts to early nineteenth-century Americans. He also took care to publish the Book of Mormon in volumes that were the same size and binding of the most commonly used Bibles in America and Britain.<sup>27</sup>

An effective translation can't help but generate its own artifacts, which is to say expressions or images meaningful to the target audience that are not part of the original text. Examples of such artifacts are easily found in the King James translation of the Bible. Neither St. Matthew nor his audience knew of candles or candlesticks, yet we accept the translation "Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick" (Matthew 5:15) without quibbling about small oil lamps. So, when Joseph, who presumably knew nothing about the animals of pre-conquest Mesoamerica, writes about "flocks" and "other sheep," those who are more knowledgeable can recognize the misattributions as artifacts produced by a translator describing unfamiliar realities to the nineteenth-century farmers that made up his audience.<sup>28</sup>

Gardner argues that Joseph's dictation of his translation to a scribe leaves its own trail of artifacts. One of his examples points to the incomplete and run-on sentences in the Book of Mormon. Across cultures, the mind can hold on to about thirty seconds of speech before needing to be refreshed. Gardner found that:

The difference between the typical completed sentences

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26. Gardner, *Engraven Upon Plates*, 18–19.

27. Gardner, *Engraven Upon Plates*, 39–43.

28. Sheep, goats, chickens and other animals capable of being domesticated did not appear in Mesoamerica until the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century (i.e. 1500s). This begs the question of what animals exactly were being dispersed by King Lamoni's enemies in Alma 23. Gardner believes that the likeliest candidate are herds of semi-domesticated sacred deer, which were an important part of Mesoamerican religious beliefs. Personal conversation with Brant Gardner, 25 October 2024.

and the various examples of incomplete sentences lies in the combination of a dangling verb and a quantity of intervening clauses. When at least three clauses followed the initial hanging verb, Joseph typically lost track of the hanging verbal clause and did not resolve it. That is consistent with the capacity of short-term memory list items. The interrupted nature of the translation added time to the dictation and thus increased the memory load. In these cases, the memory tax was so high that the sentences were left without resolution.<sup>29</sup>

You will have to read the book to discover Gardner's other, equally fascinating, insights into the evidence that Joseph's translation left of itself.

### **A Carefully Structured, Written Text**

Once Gardner has cleared away the traces that Joseph's means of translation for an early American audience left on the Book of Mormon, it becomes easier to discern aspects of the original, pre-translation manuscript. Its most obvious attribute is that it appears to have been a written text that was carefully structured. Despite the breathtaking feats of memory that anthropologists and literary scholars routinely ascribe to pre-literate cultures, none of the epics or lengthy genealogies to which they point reveal anything close to the Book of Mormon's complexity. The narrative complexities woven through the Book of Mormon include:

- extended quotations from biblical narratives with commentaries perfectly pitched to the circumstances of a Mesoamerican audience
- parallel narratives
- complex flashbacks across books and narrators
- rapid shifts in point of view and assumed audience that maintain coherence and integrity
- genealogies that unerringly follow distinctive characters who share the same names forward and backward through time

William L. Davis, a historian skeptical of the Book of Mormon's antiquity, argues in his book, *Visions in a Seer Stone*, that Joseph Smith

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29. *Engraven Upon Plates*, 59.

must have been a genius who devoted many years to organizing the framework of the Book of Mormon before his first scribe put pen to paper:

The evidence reveals that behind the project lay a systematic approach of careful planning and preparation, which, in turn, suggests that Smith spent a significant amount of time in the creation of the work. In addition, the content of the stories also suggests a process of elaborate preparatory construction. Grant Hardy, for example, records a litany of textual features that reveal such a process, including, among many others, the presence of flashbacks, parallel narratives, a hundred-year chronicle of Nephite leaders and judges, as well as several genealogies and successions of rulers. When combined together, all of these factors suggests that Smith began his work on the Book of Mormon long before he actually started to dictate the text.<sup>30</sup>

As he read that final sentence, Gardner likely muttered to himself that someone—or rather *someones*—certainly *did* begin to work on the Book of Mormon long before Joseph started to dictate. It was not just Joseph himself; it included people like Nephi, Jacob, Mosiah, Mormon, Moroni, and others.

Other evidence of a written text, as opposed to an oral one, includes Mormon's frequent use of "repetitive resumption," which bookends editorial interruptions with parallel statements that help the reader return to the original story. This was a practice that dates from the earliest known religious texts from Mesopotamia. Mormon uses the technique in Alma 30:56–58, when he writes that Korihor "was cast out, and went about from house to house begging for his food." He interrupts the scene with a report of the effect of Korihor's downfall on "all the land" before returning focus to Korihor himself by repeating, "And Korihor did go about from house to house, begging food for his support."

Gardner's knowledge of inscriptions both from Mesoamerica and

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30. *Engraven Upon Plates*, 71, quoting William L. Davis, *Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 163. For a review of the volume, see Brian C. Hales, "Theories and Assumptions: A Review of William L. Davis's *Visions in a Seer Stone*," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 39 (2020): 151–90, [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/theories-and-assumptions-a-review-of-william-l-daviss-visions-in-a-seer-stone/](http://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/theories-and-assumptions-a-review-of-william-l-daviss-visions-in-a-seer-stone/).

Ancient Near East cultures informs additional discoveries. He points out that the difficulty and expense of writing led scribes to conserve precious writing surfaces, be they parchment, stone, or metal. The spatial cues that we use today mark word, sentence, and paragraph breaks, but in ancient times almost all punctuation marks were simply too costly to consider.

As a result, Gardner has identified a series of conventions that the original writers used to communicate the narrative structure of their texts. These include:

- strategies for signaling the beginnings and ends of sentences, thematic units like paragraphs, and entire narrative arcs
- mechanisms for linking disparate episodes into a thematic unit
- the use of paratextual expressions that simultaneously convey meaning and structure

Gardner provides an example of these conventions:

Both “and now” and “and it came to pass” are textual markers that move the reader through a narrative, with the difference between the two being the location of the story on a conceptual temporal timeline. “And now” marks new information that is associated within the same timeframe as the previous information. “And it came to pass” moves the narrative through time. In [Royal] Skousen’s terminology, they are a narrative connector. The latter still bridges the subsequent narrative to the previous, but it shifts the timeframe to a later event. In modern English the two might be alternatively rendered as “at the same time” and “later.”<sup>31</sup>

These are only three of Gardner’s conclusions about the original text that are discussed in *Engraven Upon Plates*.

### **A Text with Roots in an Oral Culture**

Though Joseph’s translation is based on a thoughtfully written and edited narrative engraved on plates, that narrative’s reliance on sermons, dialogues, recitals of memorized texts, and poetic forms like chiasmus, parallelism, *leitwörter*, and other forms of stylized repetition all signal its beginnings in a predominantly oral culture. These speech

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31. *Engraven Upon Plates*, 91–92.



acts reflect the spontaneous interplay between speaker and audience that is the hallmark of authentic dialogue. The same is true of the narrators' frequent insertion of off-the-cuff commentaries on the actors and actions they are describing.

Indeed, Book of Mormon narrators often insist on the perceived superiority of oral performance. Not only can speakers tailor their messages to audience cues, but they are aided in this endeavor by the influence of the Holy Ghost.<sup>32</sup>

One of the most fascinating chapters in *Engraven Upon Plates* details artifacts left by Mesoamerican numbering and calendrical systems on the Book of Mormon, and why that may have all changed during the reign of the judges. Another contrasts evidence of Mormon's sources and editorial hand in the Large Plates with the holographic style of the Small Plates, which were written by single individuals for more limited audiences. Gardner also provides a fascinating excursus on Mormon's use of names and their meanings. For these delights, and many more, you will need to read *Engraven Upon Plates* for yourself, then trace the unfolding of these principles through the footnotes of *The Plates of Mormon*.

## Conclusions

I am obviously a fan of Gardner's meticulous and understated scholarship. Notwithstanding the occasional flash of irrepressible, incisive wit, Gardner's writing works hard to avoid drawing attention to itself. His tone is more reminiscent of a deliberate and judicious Atticus Finch than the exclamatory and undemanding popular authors so beloved by focus groups. Nevertheless, his content is fresh, well-sourced, and on point. His footnotes — unfailingly thorough, gracious, and penetrating with just enough snark to keep things interesting — are an ideal tutor for those wishing to go further.

Which brings me to my only significant criticism. In an earlier work, Gardner compares Joseph's translation of Mosiah 20:10–20 to his reconstruction of a possible Mesoamerican original. Joseph's authorized translation of this passage begins this way:

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32. See chapter nine, "Preserved Orality in Nephite Culture," in *Engraven Upon Plates*. Gardner points out that Nephi's insistence that Joseph Smith's spiritual influence will be in the form of written texts is a bold reversal of Nephi's cultural expectations (2 Nephi 3:17).

And it came to pass that the battle became exceedingly sore, for they fought like lions for their prey.

And it came to pass that the people of Limhi began to drive the Lamanites before them, yet they were not half so numerous as the Lamanites. But they fought for their lives, and for their wives, and for their children; therefore they exerted themselves and like dragons did they fight. (Mosiah 20:10–11)

This vivid, well-written scene is a good example of the way Joseph's early American audience influenced his translation, and there's nothing wrong with that. What transfixed me about the passage, though, was Gardner's provisionally Mesoamericanized revision:

And it came to pass:  
The battle became violent and noisy  
They fought [for their families]  
Like God's jaguars for their prey.

And it came to pass  
The Limhites began to drive away the Lamanites  
Though they were not half so many.  
They fought for their lives, wives, and children.  
They fought mightily.  
They fought like God's feared war serpent.<sup>33</sup>

Notice Gardner's substitution of jaguars and divine war serpents — Mesoamerican symbols of terrible divine power — for lions, which were not known to Mesoamericans. Notice also the resonant power created by structural parallels and contrasts common to oral cultures rather than the self-consciously literary or elevated language of the account in Mosiah. I am not suggesting that Gardner's translation be substituted for Joseph's in future Book of Mormon editions. But a couple of well-chosen alternative translations could have lent more life to *Engraven Upon Plates'* sound and worthy text.

In 2016, psychologist Angela Duckworth published her findings on the psychology of human achievement. The title of her book is as good a way as any to explain her thesis: *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Clearly *The Plates of Mormon* and its accompanying

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33. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Volume 3: Enos–Mosiah* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 361–62.

commentary, *Engraven Upon Plates, Printed Upon Paper*, are the beneficiaries of that same power of passion and perseverance. I hope that readers will become a witness of that power at work in these two marvelous volumes, as I have.



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