An Elegant Presentation

Kevin L. Barney

Readers of a certain age may recall participating, whether as a youth leader or as a young person, in a rite of passage in Latter-day Saint culture known as "standards night." At this event, a typical scenario that was played out was to offer a piece of cake, or perhaps a stick of gum, to a member of the audience. Usually one of the young people would readily agree; but before giving it over to the waiting youth, the leader would mash and squeeze the piece of cake through her unwashed hands or chew the piece of gum vigorously. It was, of course, still a piece of cake or gum. Nevertheless, the young person, disgusted by the treatment of this supposed "treat," recoils in horror and wants nothing further to do with it. This was meant as an object lesson on the need to maintain one's virtue and remain morally clean. But it also illustrates well the point for which I wish to adapt it: that the way something is handled and presented matters greatly as to how readily it will be received and appreciated.

The volume under review, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (hereafter simply *Reader's Edition*), edited by Grant Hardy, sets forth the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon (which is in the public

Review of Grant Hardy, ed. *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. xxiii + 710 pp. $39.95.

domain and therefore available for such purposes) in a large and relatively expensive volume. Given that one can obtain a slender missionary edition for a few dollars (or, for that matter, usually for free), why should anyone buy this book? The answer lies in its presentation.

Although I suppose few of us have an actual first edition of the Book of Mormon in our personal libraries, many of us have a facsimile of the first edition and are therefore familiar with it. It of course purported to be scripture, but the first edition looked more like a novel than like the Bible. This perceived defect has been remedied over time in subsequent editions—most notably by Orson Pratt in the 1879 edition—by shortening the chapters and adding verse numbers, and subsequently in the 1981 edition by superimposing on the text the same apparatus (in three-columned footnotes) as was used for the King James Version (hereafter KJV) of the Bible published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1979.

Ironically, however, as the official editions of the Book of Mormon over time have come to look more and more like the KJV, modern Bible translations have been moving in the opposite direction—away from the double-columned, verse-centric formatting of the KJV to presenting the text in a single-column setting, the dominant organization of which is the paragraph, not the verse. That is, modern Bible translations have been presenting the Bible to look more and more like a novel, in a format that is easier for the reader to grasp. The *Reader's Edition* presents the text of the Book of Mormon in a manner similar to that used by modern editions of the Bible. These modern editorial standards are used precisely because they enhance the readability of the text, making it easier for modern English readers to follow what is going on and to see connections between ideas and phrasing that might be lost in a more verse-centric presentation.

Inasmuch as the *Reader's Edition* has many features designed to enhance the readability, comprehension, and appreciation of the text, at this point I will simply attempt to describe them:

- The book begins with a useful sixteen-page introduction. For those approaching the text for the first time, the front and back matter in existing editions is barely sufficient to really explain what the book

is about. Hardy's introduction provides a more adequate entrée to the book for the uninitiated reader, without going too far in the other direction and overwhelming the reader with minutiae.

• Immediate context is provided to the reader by the use of in-text captions. These content headings allow the reader to see at a glance the theme of the next section of text. I personally find this in-text captioning system more useful than beginning-of-chapter headnotes. Good illustrations of where the headings clarify complicated narrative include the allegory of Zenos in Jacob 5 and the multiple strands of Helaman's narrative beginning in Alma 53.

• The text is presented in paragraphs, with the verse numbers still given but superscripted and reduced in size. Such a presentation style has become absolutely de rigueur in modern translations of the Bible. It helps the reader to see the larger context of a passage and also helps to discourage inappropriate verse-level proof texting.[1]

• Poetic passages, including in particular the quotations from Isaiah, are displayed in indented lines to show their Hebrew parallelism. Dividing the text into poetic lines is a critical refinement to the presentation that is tremendously helpful to the reader.

• Quotations from the Old Testament and prior Book of Mormon prophets are shown by various means, such as quotation marks, indenting, or italicizing.

• Limited footnotes are presented. Footnotes are used (1) when Nephite writers refer to specific past events or directly quote earlier figures (where the source of the quoted text is not known, the footnote simply indicates "reference uncertain"), (2) to indicate narrative lines that are broken off and then resumed, (3) when years are mentioned, (4) where sources have been edited, (5) to offer explanations of names, (6) to reflect alternate spellings, (7) to show alternate punctuation,

1. Inasmuch as the paragraph is a unit of thought, not of length, proper paragraphing greatly assists the reader by showing the sequencing and progression of thought in the text. Further, "paragraphing is also a matter of the eye. A reader will address himself more readily to his task if he sees from the start that he will have breathing-spaces from time to time than if what is before him looks like a marathon course." H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 435.

and (8) to indicate the original chapter breaks in the first edition. The scope of the notes is comparable to what one finds in a good modern edition of the Bible and provides the reader with minimum information for making sense of the text.

- Appendix 1 sets forth testimonies of Joseph Smith and other witnesses.
- Appendix 2 provides a chronology of the translation. It also includes pictures of Joseph Smith, the Hill Cumorah, the Anthon transcript, a page from the printer's manuscript, a first edition of the Book of Mormon, and the Nauvoo House cornerstone (where the original manuscript was deposited and suffered badly from water damage).
- Appendix 3 sets forth two documents dealing with the loss of the 116 pages of manuscript.
- Appendix 4 provides a general description of Book of Mormon plates and records.
- Appendix 5 gives some basics of Book of Mormon poetry, including an introduction to chiasmus.
- Appendix 6 details the fifty most significant changes in the text over time.
- Appendix 7 contains the following charts and maps: (1) record keepers, (2) plates and records, (3) a chronology of the narrative, (4) leaders of the Nephites and Lamanites, (5) tables regarding key families in the text, (6) Jaredite kings, (7) a map of Lehi's journey through the Arabian peninsula, (8) a map showing western New York, and (9) a map showing relative locations of Book of Mormon places, together with a legend.
- Appendix 8 sets forth a glossary of names.
- The book concludes with four pages of suggestions for further reading.

In the course of preparing this volume, Hardy has had to make literally thousands of editorial decisions, and nearly all of them have been good ones. I am particularly impressed with his sense of restraint. The temptation to try to do *too much* in this volume must have been severe at times, but Hardy's editorial lodestar of enhancing the *readability* of

the text has served him well. The result is easily the most readily readable presentation of the Book of Mormon text in existence.

When I first approached this book, there were two issues that concerned me. The first was the cost of the book, which, at just under forty dollars, is significant. The cost is, however, to a great extent a function of size. In order to accommodate the felicitous editing of the text used in this edition, the book runs to over seven hundred large pages, bound in a handsome hardback cover. In my view, the significant advantages to the elegant presentation of the text in this edition are well worth the cost. It helps to realize that Hardy is donating all his royalties from the sale of the book to the church's Humanitarian Services fund.

Part of the problem is that we have become so accustomed to inexpensive missionary editions of the Book of Mormon that we may tend to take the book somewhat for granted and not fully appreciate its value. Further, because the missionary editions are printed on onionskin paper and are quite thin (presumably to lessen the intimidation factor), we forget how long and complex a text the Book of Mormon really is. To space the text properly so that it can really breathe requires a lot of pages. Rereading the Book of Mormon in this edition reminded me how intricately constructed the book is. As Hardy points out (p. xiii), the book's high degree of literary coherence in the face of such a complex internal structure is truly stunning. If Joseph Smith were simply the author and creator of this account, then he would well deserve the label of "religious genius" it has become trendy to assign to him.

My second concern had to do with the use of the 1920 edition text. As a practicing Mormon, for devotional purposes I would obviously prefer to have access to the 1981 edition text, which of course was not available for this project. But for me, at least, Hardy's appendix on textual changes largely moots this concern. The vast majority of the changes are so immaterial that they would scarcely be noticed, even if one were to read assigned passages from this text out loud in a Sunday School class. Indeed, reviewing these changes in the text, one cannot help but chuckle at the overdramatic assertions still common in anti-Mormon literature announcing the shocked discovery that there have been over three thousand changes in the text. Further, Hardy makes

it clear that he has no intention of somehow superseding the church's official 1981 edition. That edition has tools and advantages of its own, and in many contexts it will continue to be the edition of choice. The principal virtues of the *Reader's Edition* will become apparent not when used to look up individual verses, scripture-chase style, but in reading the book as a whole, or at least significant portions of it.

Although these initial two concerns were largely allayed when I read the book itself, a third concern arose at the conclusion of my reading, and that is the lack of an index. Many readers of this volume may not be Latter-day Saints or may otherwise lack ready access to the Topical Guide and other indexing resources of the official editions of the scriptures. I would hope that if a second edition is prepared, an index would be added.

There were very few points at which I noted an error or disagreed with Hardy's handling of an issue. As is obligatory in reviews such as this, however, I will mention a few:

- Hardy says that the "spokesman" of 2 Nephi 3:18 is probably Sidney Rigdon, referencing Doctrine and Covenants 100:9 (p. 69n). While this is true, the note could have been clearer on the timing involved. Since that section was not received until 12 October 1833, it should be apparent that this association was made only later, in retrospect, and that Joseph did not have Sidney in mind as he dictated the Book of Mormon passage. I mention this clarification only because there are those who continue to hold to the Spalding theory of Book of Mormon origins and think that Sidney Rigdon was involved in that book's creation, notwithstanding the fact that Joseph had not even yet met Rigdon.

- In the midst of the quotation of Isaiah 2 in 2 Nephi 12:5, Hardy puts the words "yea, come, for ye have all gone astray, every one to his wicked ways" in parentheses and notes that the phrases in parentheses are not in the KJV (p. 92n). Yet these words represent a clear allusion to Isaiah 53:6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." A note to this effect would have been helpful to the reader.

• Hardy properly gives the 1920 text of 2 Nephi 30:6 as "white and delightsome" (p. 133). In appendix 6 he properly gives the textual evidence for that reading and for the variant "pure and delightsome" (p. 668). Given the tremendous amount of discussion of this particular variant, however, this is one place where I would have preferred an actual footnote on p. 133 alerting the reader to the alternate reading and then cross-referencing the recitation of textual evidence in the appendix.

• Hardy writes that "the identifications of *neas* and *sheum* are uncertain" (p. 199n). It is fairly clear, however, that *sheum* derives from an Akkadian word for grain.[2] This association could be qualified with a "probably" or even a "possibly," as Hardy does in other notes where suggestions made are somewhat speculative.

These kinds of nits, however, were few and far between. Overall I found the notes to be excellent and innovative. For instance, I very much liked Hardy's treatment of chronological matters. He correctly gives the first year of the reign of Zedekiah as 597 BC, not 600. And he recognizes (p. xxii) that chronological correspondences to our calendar are necessarily approximate, both because of uncertainty over the length of the Nephite year and also because of uncertainty as to the year when Jesus was born. For the internal chronological systems based on either the reigns of the judges or the birth of Christ, Hardy simply designates the years with negative or positive numbers (e.g., -39 or +22) to show how the years relate to the sign of Christ's birth.

A significant problem with the official editions of the scriptures is that they do not handle quotations well. For example, to find quotations of the Old Testament in the New Testament it is necessary to look in the Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Quotations"; in situ cross-references are not consistently given, and even when they are given, they are often drowned in a sea of references so that their significance is not fully appreciated. To illustrate, try this experiment: First, read Hebrews 1 in the 1979 edition

2. Hildegard Lewy, "On Some Old Assyrian Cereal Names," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 76/4 (1956): 201–4, cited in Matthew Roper, "Right on Target: Boomerang Hits and the Book of Mormon" at www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2001RopM.html (accessed 17 March 2004).

of the KJV. Then read it again in an edition that shows the quotes with a different typeface, such as bold or italic. When you can immediately see and appreciate the extent to which the author is quoting from the Old Testament, it is a very different reading experience. This volume handles such quotations much better, not only with footnoted references in the text itself, but also by showing the quotes with either indented or italicized text. This intertextuality can especially be seen when Nephi interprets Isaiah at 1 Nephi 22 (such as at pp. 57–60) and in 2 Nephi 25 and following (pp. 117–34).[3]

I have a particular interest in the Hebraic poetry of the Book of Mormon,[4] and so I was especially pleased to see that Hardy used indentation to assist the reader in recognizing parallel lines. I was also relieved that Hardy did not try to go too far and replicate all of the poetic and rhetorical structures set forth by Donald W. Parry in his *Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (hereafter *Parallelistic Patterns*).[5] Although the Hardy and Parry volumes overlap slightly in purpose, ultimately they serve very different needs. *Parallelistic Patterns* shows no attention to matters of font, spacing, graphic design, headers, and so forth, and is essentially unusable as one's primary text of the Book of Mormon. But that is not its reason for being—it is rather an explication of an argument, a resource, reference, and repository for detailed information regarding Hebrew poetic and rhetorical forms in the Book of Mormon text. Conversely, the purpose of Hardy's *Reader's Edition* is specifically that of providing a very readable presentation, and to get mired in the details set forth in *Parallelistic Patterns* would not have furthered that purpose. In my view, both *Reader's Edition* and *Parallelistic Patterns* are important volumes

3. I liked and appreciated Hardy's designation of some of this commentary as "Midrash" in the captions.

4. See for example Kevin L. Barney, "Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 15–81.

5. Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992). For a review of *Parallelistic Patterns,* see Jo Ann H. Seely, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 203–8.

for the libraries of students of the Book of Mormon, and neither fills the particular role of the other as a tool of Book of Mormon study.

The glossary of names is useful because it is more than just a list. It identifies individuals by family relationships and place names by geographic orientations, and it gives the first reference in the text where the name occurs. Hardy also follows the excellent practice of the 1981 edition of using subscripted numbers to differentiate different people who bear the same name.

I was glad to see that in the "Suggestions for Further Reading" Hardy has included a section on "Critical Responses." To be useful as a scholar's edition, the book needs to point the reader to some of this literature.

I well remember a couple of decades ago attending conferences at Brigham Young University at which Truman Madsen managed to assemble some of the world's foremost scholars of religion, several of whom brought to bear their considerable skills and tools on the Book of Mormon itself. Those were heady times, but there has been too little of that kind of scholarly attention paid to the Book of Mormon since. As the Catholic scholar Thomas O'Dea famously noted many years ago, "the *Book of Mormon* has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it."[6] Perhaps one of the more well known recent examples of this dictum is Harold Bloom, whose comments on the Book of Mormon do not reflect deep understanding and apparently were not benefited by an actual reading of the text.[7] The day when this sort of an effort will qualify as scholarship on the Book of Mormon has passed. Ideally accompanied by Terryl Givens's introduction to Book

6. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26, quoted at p. xxiii.

7. See Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 85–86. Robert A. Rees, "Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance," *Dialogue* 35/3 (2002): 97 n. 40, concludes: "Frankly, I don't believe Bloom gave the book his best critical effort" and notes that "in conversation, one of Bloom's former students told me that Bloom confessed to him that he had not read the Book of Mormon."

of Mormon studies,[8] Grant Hardy's *Reader's Edition* now makes easily available, even for the uninitiated, a text of the Book of Mormon that can be understood and will reward careful reading. As various universities begin to flirt with the concept of "Mormon studies," this is a most welcome development indeed.

If it is not clear by now, let me reiterate that I loved this book and thought it was very well executed (and very much needed). A word of warning, however: reading the Book of Mormon all the way through in this edition might well spoil you from reading it any other way.

8. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).