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Read This Book: A Review of the Maxwell Institute Study Edition of the Book of Mormon

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READ THIS BOOK: A REVIEW OF THE MAXWELL INSTITUTE STUDY EDITION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

Brant A. Gardner

Abstract: *The Maxwell Institute Study Edition of the Book of Mormon is an important tool for personal and class study of the Book of Mormon. Not only does it provide a better reading experience, it has important features that enhance study.*

Review of Grant Hardy, ed. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University / Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018). 648 pp. \$35.00 (paperback).

During the October 2018 Women's session of general conference, President Russell M. Nelson challenged the sisters (and presumably all readers) to read the Book of Mormon by the end of 2018. This particular edition of the Book of Mormon arrives too late to help with that challenge, but the very next time Latter-day Saints are admonished to read the English version of the Book of Mormon, this is the edition they should read.

Because the *Maxwell Institute Study Edition* is not the official edition of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I am aware of the audacity of my suggestion to read this edition rather than the official one. One reason I am comfortable with that statement is that the *Study Edition* is based on the official version (1981, with 2013 updates). That means the words read will be the very words one would read in the official text. It is what the *Study Edition* adds that improves both the reading and the study experience.

The *Study Edition* is not totally new, but it is clearly totally revised and reexamined. In 2003 Grant Hardy published *The Book of Mormon:*

A Reader's Edition through the University of Illinois Press. At that time, he used the 1920 edition (in public domain) rather than the official version. What he innovated in that edition was a formatting designed, as the title indicated, for the reader. The text retained all the chapter and verse apparatus that allowed a reader to engage with any and all references to the Book of Mormon's verses, but they were formatted into paragraphs. Along with the paragraphs were section headers that provided in-context information about the subject of the following set of verses. Hardy also included a footnote to indicate where the original chapters ended, prior to the changes in the 1879 version of the Book of Mormon. It was a much nicer reading experience than the official text, which is broken into chunks by no logic other than whatever drove the decision to create a set of text as a verse.¹

Grant Hardy himself is the editor of the new *Study Edition*, and it is clearly built upon his earlier work. Although he kept much, if not most, of the paragraphing from the *Reader's Edition*, he went through the text anew and at times changed his mind on where paragraphs would begin. The reason the same person could see the text in two different ways is that there is no precise way to capture paragraphs.

Also, neither the original nor the printer's manuscript contained much punctuation. Not only were there few periods, the capitalization was random, based more on words than on conceptual paragraphs. Having personally attempted similar paragraphing, I believe the text does not conform to the choices that drive modern paragraphing. Thus, creating paragraphs imposes on the text a logic not necessarily inherent in the text. All that means is that any two people creating paragraphs, and even the same person at different times, will create different paragraphs. The purpose of the paragraphs does not matter much. They are there to make reading easier, not to provide meaning in and of themselves.

Where the *Reader's Edition* marked the original chapters in footnotes, the original chapters are much more explicit in the *Study Guide*. At the center of each page's header, Hardy notes in brackets the original chapter number. To keep references clear, Hardy uses Arabic numerals for the current chapters and verses and Roman numerals for the 1830 chapters. Additionally, the original chapter numbers are shown in brackets when

1. Orson Pratt versified the text for the 1879 version. A chapter and verse designation made it much easier to refer to the text and enable all readers to easily find the same passage. The decisions to create verses followed no specific logic. Pratt used the sentences as they were created for the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon and made selections based somewhat on size and on the meaning of the selected verses.

they appear within the text. Most of these appear before current chapters, but at times Orson Pratt divided the original chapter to provide ending information of one chapter at the beginning of the next.

Understanding the original chapters allows for a type of understanding unavailable in editions that follow only the modern chapters. No matter which edition we read, we can know which stories Nephi₁ included. Knowing which set of stories Nephi₁ thought belonged together in a chapter (for example chapter I comprises our chapters 1–5) helps us understand Nephi₁ himself rather than only the stories.

An important visual change comes in the sections quoting Isaiah. Rather than simply providing the text, Hardy highlights in bold the additions to the KJV text and provides footnotes for significant removals of text. This allows the reader not only to read the text but also to identify the differences easily. This is one of the places where the concept of study and easy reading combine. The reader learns important information simply through the process of reading the text, while the visual markers supply information quickly and easily.

Those who will read this text for study will find a wealth of information in the footnotes. Some footnotes indicate references to the Bible, others to intratextual links. Good study notes help the reader understand the text better. One of the ways Hardy supplies important information is by providing a footnote for references to important variant readings.

The authoritative work in the multiple changes in the text, from the manuscripts through all published versions, is Royal Skousen's *Analysis of the Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, an exhaustive look at all changes. Hardy combed that source to provide the important or interesting variants. Most readers of the *Study Edition* will be unaware that the *Analysis of the Textual Variants* is a work in six volumes and 4,060 pages. They will therefore be unaware of the significant labor Hardy undertook to digest the possible variants to identify those he deemed worth entering in the footnotes.

The *Reader's Edition* contained many helpful maps and charts, and many of those are included in the *Study Edition*, updated as needed. One difference is that the *Reader's Edition* was written for both Latter-day Saint and secular readers, and some of the notes were directed at the secular reader. The *Study Edition* is clearly for Latter-day Saints, and the secular-facing notes are not required. They are replaced by excellent introductions to information important to the faithful reader. A nice touch is placing the testimonies of the three and eight witnesses *before*

Emma Smith's and Joseph's testimonies. The statements are not new, but their placement in such prominence is.

I am sure one feature of the text will be mostly ignored, if not assumed to be an error. At the end of Words of Mormon and before the page indicating that Mormon's abridgment of the large plates is to begin, there is a single completely blank page. I hope that isn't an error, rather an effort to subtly remind the reader of an important distinction between what he or she has just read and the text that follows. Although we call the whole *The Book of Mormon*, technically, Mormon's book doesn't begin until Mosiah (and begins after the lost beginning to the book of Mosiah). That single blank page may be a striking reminder of a significant difference between the two parts of the text.

The *Study Edition* has the same text as the officially published Book of Mormon. Thus there is nothing to lose by reading this version. However, there is so much to gain that this is the version to prefer. Were I to teach a class on the Book of Mormon at any level, I would want the class to be reading this version.² There is simply much more to be understood as one reads.

Of course, read the Book of Mormon in any format, but if you have the option, read this version. It is currently the best edition of the Book of Mormon available.

Brant A. Gardner (MA, State University of New York Albany) is the author of *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* and *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, both published through Greg Kofford Books. He has contributed articles to *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* and *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community*. He has presented papers at the *FairMormon* conference as well as at *Sunstone*.

2. Other versions are available. The use of paragraphs rather than verses is quite common in these editions, so the paragraphing is not the reason I recommend this version. Rather, it is in the additions that provide an easier interface into a deeper and more enriching understanding of the text.