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Author(s): Brant A. Gardner

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LABOR DILIGENTLY TO WRITE: THE ANCIENT MAKING OF A MODERN SCRIPTURE

Brant A. Gardner

[Editor's Note: We are pleased to present the eighth (and final) installment from a book entitled *Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture*. It is being presented in serialized form as an aid to help readers prepare for the 2020 *Come Follow Me* course of study. This final installment is the Preface for the book. This is a new approach for *Interpreter*, and we hope you find it helpful.]

Preface

Brant Gardner changed the way I read the Book of Mormon.

Back in the mid-2000's I was preparing to teach two courses on the Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University as an adjunct professor. I had taught several New Testament courses in prior semesters, but this was my first time teaching Book of Mormon. As I began to prep for the course I began to get more and more frustrated. Due to my years as a Classics major, I had felt pretty confident in teaching the New Testament. I had spent years studying the ancient world, toiling with Greek and Latin texts, and poring through the books, commentaries, and articles crucial to New Testament studies.

When it came time to teach the Book of Mormon, I was adrift. Where were the monographs? The commentaries? Much of what had been published on the Book of Mormon was either doctrinally oriented or apologetically motivated. Both of these types of publications were useful, but I desperately wanted to have someone take me into the world of the text and open up the Book of Mormon in a similar fashion to what I had enjoyed in studying the New Testament.

As luck would have it, right before I was to begin teaching I was wandering through the old Pioneer Book store in Provo when I noticed

a set of books with the title *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*. They were written by Brant Gardner, a scholar whom at that point I was unfamiliar with. I cautiously took the volume on First Nephi off the shelf, eager to see what an “Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon” looked like. I was instantly drawn in by the level of attention and depth paid to every verse. As the title suggested, these books were less concerned with matching up Book of Mormon verses to modern LDS doctrine than they were with trying to dig deeper into who Nephi was. What was his agenda? His theological background? His connection to Isaiah? Why did he structure his record the way he did? I was so excited to find these four books (at the time only the first four had been published — I was told by the employee I would have to wait a while to get the last two) that I immediately purchased all four, figuring that I could easily convince my wife and two small children that going a week or so without food was a small sacrifice to make when compared to Dad’s awesome new books. (I was unsuccessful in *that* endeavor, but that’s a story for another day.)

For the next few months I pored over Gardner’s commentaries, finding nuggets of gold on every page. I was impressed most of all by how careful of a reader he was — gleaning crucial insights from words or phrases but then also able to contextualize what was happening in an individual verse into the larger picture of the Book of Mormon. It’s safe to say that when I finally bought the last two books in the series and finished reading all six volumes that Gardner’s works had reshaped how I read the Book of Mormon. For the first time I felt I really understood the context of Jacob’s temple sermon, or the theological position of Noah’s priests, or Mormon’s possible typological use of Gadianton Robbers, or the many different social and economic reasons behind the collapse of the Nephites. My students were certainly better-off, as I was able to bring insights into the Book of Mormon that really opened up things for them as well. Suffice it to say, I was certainly a big fan of Brant Gardner from that moment on.

Gardner surprised me again in 2011 when I saw he had published a new book on the translation of the Book of Mormon, as I just sort of figured that anyone who published six massive volumes of a commentary might want to take a break for a while. As with his commentary, I found his new volume extremely rewarding. Because I was coming more and more to appreciate the connections between the Bible and the Book of Mormon but hadn’t been able to work out any semblance of a solution myself, I eagerly devoured his take on how the symbols on the Gold Plates

somehow correlated to the King James English of the Book of Mormon. (Literalist, Functional, and Conceptual Equivalence? Brilliant!) I was pleased that Gardner never seemed to skirt around the complicated issues of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and his solution to the complexities of Gold Plates text vs. English Book of Mormon is well thought out and unique. I could say much the same for Gardner's subsequent book, *The Book of Mormon as History*, which takes readers sequentially through the Book of Mormon and deepens much of the contextualization he put forward in his commentary series.

It was with a great deal of anticipation that I opened the pages of Gardner's newest book, *Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture*. What would Brant have in store for his readers next? The answer, as I found, was a deep-dive into the authorship and structure of the Book of Mormon. Gardner's book can be neatly divided into two halves: Nephi and Mormon as authors/editors, and the Book of Mormon as a carefully developed text. In the first half of the book, Gardner asks and answers many of the issues peripheral to the writing of the Book of Mormon. For example:

- Did Nephi and Mormon outline their text in advance, or was their writing largely extemporaneous?
- Why did Nephi and Mormon begin and end chapters the way that they did?
- Where might Nephi have gained the experience to work metal?
- Why does Mormon sometimes insert small digressions within larger accounts?
- Were some of the names of Book of Mormon characters changed to reflect their role in the story Mormon was crafting?
- What may have been on the lost 116 pages and what was not?

While some of these questions (some of which I wasn't even aware of prior to reading the book) are more difficult to answer than others, Gardner methodically works his way through the text and offers plausible and understandable explanations.

The second half of the book is the first attempt I have seen to really read the Book of Mormon in light of its original chapter breaks. Readers of the Book of Mormon who are used to studying the text using the shorter system of chapters introduced by Orson Pratt will find their study of the Book of Mormon enriched by looking at how Nephi and Mormon

originally organized the text. Reading the Book of Mormon through the lens of the original chapter breaks was certainly eye-opening for me, and upon finishing the book I felt that my understanding of who Nephi and Mormon were and what they were trying to say in their writings was greatly enhanced. The thematic coherence of the original chapters is stressed, with an eye toward why and how Nephi and Mormon began and ended each chapter the way that they did. Why were certain things emphasized? Why were other things omitted? While Pratt's modern chapter breaks are useful, they are artificial and, as Gardner demonstrates again and again, we miss much by ignoring the way Nephi and Mormon crafted and constructed their stories.

Brant Gardner continues to change the way I read the Book of Mormon. Read this book. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to deepen their own reading and understanding of this divine text.

—Nick Frederick
December 2019