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## Moving Beyond the Historicity Question, or a Manifesto for Future Book of Mormon Research

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## **Moving Beyond the Historicity Question, or a Manifesto for Future Book of Mormon Research**

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# MOVING BEYOND THE HISTORICITY QUESTION, OR A MANIFESTO FOR FUTURE BOOK OF MORMON RESEARCH

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Newell D. Wright

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**Abstract:** *Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide* by four Brigham Young University religion professors reviews the field of Book of Mormon studies from the late nineteenth century to the current day. After the historical review of the field, the authors lay out a research agenda for the twenty-first century that, by and large, moves on from the Book of Mormon historicity question that so engaged twentieth-century scholars. This review examines the authors' claims and demonstrates that the scope of the book is not as broad as it could or should be. Absent perspectives, blind spots, incomplete twenty-first-century research trends, and a discussion of research tools should have been included in the book but were not included. This review ends with a discussion of "the gatekeeper problem" in Book of Mormon studies.

Daniel Becerra, Amy Easton-Flake, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Joseph M. Spencer, all professors of religion at Brigham Young University, have put together an impressive book, a history of Book of Mormon studies entitled *Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide*.<sup>1</sup> The volume is positioned for and targeted to three different types

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1. Daniel Becerra, Amy Easton-Flake, Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, *Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022).

of readers. The first reader segment consists of “believing latter-day Saints — especially young ones — who are interested in contributing to Book of Mormon scholarship” (p. 5). The second segment is “the many Latter-day Saints who ... want to deepen their private study of the Book of Mormon without any ambitions about producing new scholarship” (p. 5). For this segment, the authors hope the book will aid in navigating a growing corpus of Book of Mormon scholarship and help them discover the best of what has been produced. Finally, “and most delicately,” as the authors say, “we write for non-Latter-day Saint scholars (and nonscholars) who have some interest in the Book of Mormon and might appreciate some guidance in navigating a field that’s so deeply shaped by the concerns of believing readers” (p. 6).

### Brief Overview

*Book of Mormon Studies* has an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. Most helpful for both seasoned and new Book of Mormon scholars is the annotated bibliography at the end of the book. In the following sections I provide a brief overview of the content of the book before offering a brief critique and summing up.

### Chapter 1

The first chapter provides a history of the field of Book of Mormon studies, covering approximately 120 years of scholarship, from Orson Pratt’s restructuring of the Book of Mormon into chapters and verses in 1879 to roughly the end of the twentieth century. Serious students of the Book of Mormon such as the aforementioned Orson Pratt, James E. Talmadge, B.H. Roberts, George Reynolds, Janne M. Sjödahl, Roy A. West, William E. Berrett, and Milton R. Hunter each produced works that pushed the serious study of the Book of Mormon forward. The first scholars trained in a relevant discipline — Hugh W. Nibley, Sidney B. Sperry, and M. Wells Jakeman — arrived on the scene in the late 1940s and helped to found the nascent field of Book of Mormon studies. The chapter details the contributions of each of these scholars, including the tough questions they began tackling after the publication of *No Man Knows My History* by Fawn McKay Brodie.

These three scholars (Nibley, Sperry, and Jakeman) dominated the world of Book of Mormon studies through the mid-1960s when each, for different reasons, stopped publishing about the Book of Mormon, leaving

the field to younger scholars.<sup>2</sup> The following years largely witnessed a pause in Book of Mormon studies during which several notable events occurred, including the Church's withdrawal of sponsorship for various historical projects, the Mark Hoffman forgeries, countercultural movements, the debate over blacks holding the priesthood, an increase in criticism against the Church, and President Ezra Taft Benson's renewed emphasis on the Book of Mormon. These events spurred the creation of the second wave of Book of Mormon scholarly studies in the twentieth century and the creation of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) in 1979.

FARMS honored the three pioneers — Jakeman, Sperry, and Nibley — by making their works available to a new generation. It also featured the work of new scholars such as John W. Welch and John Sorenson. One aspect of FARMS that *Book of Mormon Studies* laments was the intense focus on the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon, or the historicity question, at the expense of other questions.<sup>3</sup> In particular, FARMS scholars found themselves in more or less constant arguments with authors published by Signature Books.<sup>4</sup> FARMS devoted a lot of time, effort, and ink to defending traditional views of the Book of Mormon and challenging the thesis in Signature Books' publications that the Book of Mormon is, at best, a work of inspired fiction. This conflict between FARMS and Signature Books, *Book of Mormon Studies* points out, "determined the shape of Book of Mormon studies for most of the 1990s" (p.22). The twentieth-century question that FARMS sought

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2. My father, H. Curtis Wright, was one of these younger scholars, and he was also Hugh Nibley's first graduate student. His most notable publication was "Ancient Burial of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes: Their Implications for Library History" in the *Libraries and Culture* Vol. 1 (Winter 1981), 48–70. This was a brief article with an extensive bibliography of references to metal documents in stone boxes. The article was ostensibly about librarianship, but Latter-day Saints immediately saw the significance of what he wrote. He later expanded his bibliography through 2006 in a self-published book titled *Modern Presentism and Ancient Metallic Epigraphy* (Wings of Fire Press: Salt Lake City, 2006).

3. Indeed, *Book of Mormon Studies* describes it as "unsafe for believing scholars to speak of reading the Book of Mormon as literature" because of the ongoing controversy about the Book of Mormon being either an ancient text or inspired fiction with a nineteenth century origin (pp. 19–20).

4. One of my associates described the publisher and those who published with Signature Books as "the Signaturi," complete with suggestions of being a nefarious secret society determined to tear down traditional views of the Book of Mormon from within the Church.

to answer, *Book of Mormon Studies* suggests, was this: “Is the Book of Mormon the ancient text it claims to be?” (p.24).

The influence of FARMS began to wane early in the new millennium, *Book of Mormon Studies* posits, with the publication of two books: Terryl L. Givens’ *By the Hand of Mormon*,<sup>5</sup> a reception history, and Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon*,<sup>6</sup> a work of literary criticism. Both books “bracketed” the truth claims about the Book of Mormon. That is, they set the historicity question aside and focused on other important aspects of the Book of Mormon. Both books were published to wide acclaim by a major university press not affiliated with the Church and, *Book of Mormon Studies* suggests, opened the way for others to write about the Book of Mormon without reference to historicity.

## Chapter 2

The second chapter of *Book of Mormon Studies* describes the field of Book of Mormon studies as the authors see it today. They identify seven principal areas of study: textual production, historical origins, literary criticism, intertextuality, theological interpretation, reception history, and ideology critique. Each of these will be briefly described.

Textual production tries “to reconstruct as responsibly as possible the circumstances surrounding the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon” (p. 32). An example of this approach that the authors highlight is *From Darkness into Light* by Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat,<sup>7</sup> a research project that benefitted from systematic study of documents made public by the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

The next research area, historical origins, focuses on the origin of the Book of Mormon, the historicity question that FARMS focused on. An impressive work in this vein, according to *Book of Mormon Studies*, was Brant Gardner’s six-volume commentary on the Book of Mormon, *Second Witness*.<sup>8</sup> *Book of Mormon Studies* includes in this category studies that suggest the “Book of Mormon is a modern document and

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5. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

6. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

7. Michael Hubbard Mackay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness Unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015).

8. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007).

so should be studied as a product of nineteenth-century culture and influences” (p. 41).

The third area of research, literary criticism, is defined by *Book of Mormon Studies* as a “type of criticism that, when applied to scripture, involves analysis of how a text organizes the stories and ideas it presents to the reader, especially focusing on the way form gives shape to content” (p. 43). Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon* is the paradigmatic example of this area of research, but many other researchers have engaged in literary criticism over the years, including some who publish in *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth area, intertextuality, “refers to relationships of interaction between a volume of scripture and some other text. In Book of Mormon studies, this usually concerns the relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Bible” (p. 46). For example, what is one to make of New Testament language in the Book of Mormon? One of the authors of *Book of Mormon Studies*, Nicholas J. Frederick, has made intertextuality a major portion of his life’s work.<sup>10</sup> This category also includes comparative studies that examine similar language and concepts in the

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9. For example, Val Larsen laid out a rationale and methodology for literary criticism in his article, “First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting the Greater Apostasy,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 39–43. According to Larsen, “A literary reading of a text is sensitive to structure, symbols, archetypes, intertextuality, and how the text speaks to present issues or concerns. While a textual historian may properly focus on the author’s communicative intent in the moment of composition, a reception historian on how a text was understood at a given moment in time, those who offer literary readings typically seek to create a new moment in reception history by revealing unseen dimensions of meaning now cognizable and compelling. Such meanings, unlike historical meanings in their narrowest sense, are not fixed in time or by time. They are shaped by events that occur *ex post facto*, including events happening now. So while history may add important dimensions of meaning to a text, in a literary reading it subserves other larger truths and rhetorical purposes,” 42. All of Larsen’s many articles in *Interpreter* use literary criticism as the primary methodology. See also Steven L. Olsen, “Abridging the Records of the Zoramite Mission: Mormon as Historian,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022): 183–90.

10. For example, see *They Shall Grow Together: The Bible in the Book of Mormon*, eds. Charles Swift and Nicholas J. Frederick (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022). A second *Book of Mormon Studies* author, Joseph M. Spencer, also has an article in *They Shall Grow Together*.



scriptures of different religious traditions, such as *Postponing Heaven* by Catholic scholar Jad Hatem.<sup>11</sup>

The fifth area, theological interpretation, can be described as “reasoned reflection on God or on revelation” (p. 51). The authors are careful to distinguish between doctrinal and theological interpretations of scripture. Doctrine is, in the words of Adam S. Miller, “authoritative, decided and announced by leaders of the Church. By contrast, theology is deliberately academic and speculative, addressing questions of interest to the life of faith but of little or no institutional importance” (p. 53). An example of theological research is John Christopher Thomas’s *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon*.<sup>12</sup> Another example is the *Brief Theological Introduction* series published by the Maxwell Institute in 2020.

Reception history, the sixth research area, traces “the ways people have received, appropriated, and used scriptural texts throughout history” (p. 54). This includes the history of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, from its translation and printing in the nineteenth century to today. One example *Book of Mormon Studies* mentions is nonmember Paul Gutjahr’s *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*.<sup>13</sup> This book chronicles such aspects of the Book of Mormon as its influence on missionary work and its depiction in literature, art, illustration, film, and theater. Given’s influential *By the Hand of Mormon*, the book that first broke away from a focus on historicity, is also an example of reception history.

The last research area is ideology critique, often perspectives of “underrepresented demographics and diverse disciplinary backgrounds.” These studies focus on topics “like disability, gender, race, postcolonialism, [and] social justice” (p. 57). Reflecting the zeitgeist of our times, these same approaches appear in disciplines ranging from agriculture to zoology and everything in between, so it is no surprise they also appear in Book of Mormon studies.

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11. Jad Hatem, *Postponing Heaven: The Three Nephites, the Bodhisattva, and the Mahdi*, trans. Jonathon Penny (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015). One of the authors of *Book of Mormon Studies*, Joseph M. Spencer, was also a series editor for *Postponing Heaven*.

12. John Christopher Thomas, *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2016).

13. Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

### Chapter 3

Chapter three, “Overcoming Obstacles,” discusses the contribution of Royal Skousen and his critical text project. Much is made in *Book of Mormon Studies* about the need for a critical text as a foundation for Book of Mormon studies. The chapter also reviews the history of various commentaries and calls for a newer type of commentary to be written — one that is written not by a single individual but by a group of scholars. These commentaries would resemble the *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*,<sup>14</sup> which, though not a commentary, was written by multiple authors who condensed and incorporated most of twentieth-century Book of Mormon research into a single volume.

The chapter also calls for more civil discourse in the discussion of the historicity question and the questions raised in the emerging research agendas detailed in chapter two. “It’s time for all accusation and all questioning of motivation to cease,” the authors say. They continue:

We can feel confident doing this because taking the Book of Mormon seriously is already assuming the position of the apologist. We need to recognize that both scholars particularly shaped by twentieth-century concerns and scholars particularly shaped by twenty-first-century concerns are all apologists together, to the extent that they work seriously on the Book of Mormon. All earnest readers of the Book of Mormon attune themselves to its truth, even if in the act of thinking further about difficult issues they occasionally draw conclusions that make more traditional believers temporarily uncomfortable. Certainly all readers of the Book of Mormon who explicitly avow faith in the truth of the book deserve the benefit of the doubt from all other readers who avow faith in the truth of the book. We’re all working on a truth that’s grander than any of our individual approaches to it can reveal. (p. 79)

*Book of Mormon Studies* calls for more academic charity in research, defined as the “practice of attributing the most reasonable or most defensible argument to one’s opponent before critiquing it. In the context of faith, it includes the assumption — unless clear evidence indicates otherwise — that scholars are working in good faith for good purposes” (p. 76). They make the claim that this is necessary because readers are

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14. Dennis L. Largey et al., eds., *Book of Mormon Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003).

just as likely, if not more likely, to dismiss the Book of Mormon “over questions about racism, gender, or violence today as they are over questions about historicity” (p. 81).

This chapter is a plea for tolerance from researchers who do not focus exclusively on the historicity of the Book of Mormon. It asks for tolerance for those who move beyond the historicity question.

## **Chapter 4**

Chapter four, “Common Questions,” looks at questions that have arisen during the first two decades of the twenty-first century regarding the Book of Mormon and contrasts how they are now answered with how they were answered by twentieth-century scholars. It attempts to answer the question about “what ‘the truth of the Book of Mormon’ means” (p. 83) in a broadening field of Book of Mormon inquiry. The chapter poses seven questions relevant to both twentieth- and twenty-first-century researchers: “How was the Book of Mormon translated? Why have changes been made to the text of the Book of Mormon? Did the Book of Mormon derive from nineteenth-century texts? What about anachronisms in the Book of Mormon? Does language from Isaiah belong in the Book of Mormon? Does the Book of Mormon depend on the New Testament? Where did the events of the Book of Mormon take place?” (p. 84). One example will suffice to describe the flavor of this chapter.

The Book of Mormon contains language from the New Testament that was written scores or hundreds of years before such language was written down in the Old World. What are we to make of this? A traditional, twentieth-century answer holds both Book of Mormon and New Testament authors had access to “similarly worded ancient texts (in, say, the brass plates) that aren’t extant today” (p. 101). Newer approaches accept that the New Testament language is there by divine design and researchers then seek to understand what it means in a different theological context. The contemporary scholars cited say the language is not simply plagiarism, as critics have claimed, but rather provides new ways of understanding old and familiar language by locating it in new theological contexts.

## **Chapter 5**

Chapter five, “New Directions,” provides a rationale for moving away from an exclusive focus on historicity and towards other compelling

questions. Based on their experience teaching religion at Brigham Young University, the authors state:

[R]eaders of the Book of Mormon today are as likely — if not in fact *more* likely — to reject the Book of Mormon for reasons that have nothing to do with historicity. They're as likely or more likely to drop the book and the religion endorsing it because the volume seems to them to be irrelevant, archaic, boring, unenlightening, or ethically troubling. This is something we see among our students too often, and there's reason to help a new generation see the book's power that we see. (p. 112)

They liken the historicity debate to starting a car repeatedly in a garage, but never taking it out on the road to see how it drives and where it will take them. Making sure the engine works is important, but once that has been determined, there is much to learn about the car that can be learned only by going for a ride. The authors freely acknowledge they stand on the very large shoulders of twentieth-century researchers, but they argue there are new and different questions to answer that are relevant to a different time, age, and set of readers.

The rest of the chapter examines questions contemporary readers are likely to raise, along with perspectives on these new questions. Racial identity is an important current issue. When the Book of Mormon seems to cast goodness as white and evil as black, how do we go about explaining these passages? Women are clearly underrepresented in the Book of Mormon. Why? What can we learn from their absence? What about mental health problems and other disabilities? Why is there so much violence in the Book of Mormon? How is that relevant for us today? What about politics and war? As *Book of Mormon Studies* states, "A reader with intense worries about political instability and growing political polarization is less likely to balk at the lack of a recognizable geographic model that fits the Book of Mormon than at the book's apparent readiness to be politically appropriated by extremist groups" (p. 121). In short, how is the Book of Mormon relevant to pressing issues in the twenty-first century?

Answering this last question, the authors claim, is the goal of twenty-first century Book of Mormon studies. The authors desire to show the book's relevance, that it is not "simply boring, irrelevant, clichéd, or uninformative" (p. 122). They want to show the importance of the Book of Mormon in an increasingly secular world, that it presents "a nuanced

and rich Christology and a theology of grace that has deeply important practical implications for the life of faith” (p. 123).

## The Appendix

The greatest contribution of this book may be its appendix. There are five sections in the appendix, four of which are annotated: getting started, getting serious, getting specialized, and getting around. A final section lists other sources cited in the book. As I compared citations in the appendix with my quite substantial library, I discovered that I was missing important volumes and articles. Thus, the appendix alone was worth the purchase price of the book.

## Critique

I really liked all 184 pages of *Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide*. The four authors have gone to extraordinary lengths to remain fair and even-handed in their treatment of twentieth-century scholars and scholarship while at the same time promoting their twenty-first-century agenda. My impression is that they have, by and large, succeeded in this effort. And yet, the book still has some holes in it. I will now examine the problems of absent perspectives, research trends that could have been added to chapter five, research tools, and what I call “the gatekeeper problem.” I then sum up and conclude.

## Absent Perspectives

While I quite like this book, it would have been stronger if they had included as an author someone — anyone — for whom historicity is still a burning issue.<sup>15</sup> While the authors do try to be scrupulously fair, the deck is clearly and myopically stacked in favor of what they frame as the twenty-first-century view. Sometimes their bias is explicit and conscious (e.g., as is made clear in chapter 5), but other times it is implicit and perhaps unconscious.

An example is the uneven representation of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (which one of the authors, Joseph M. Spencer, edits) and *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*. There are thirty references from the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* in the

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15. A quick look at the Faculty of Religious Education suggested some names, e.g., David Seely, Gaye Strathearn, David Calabro, and from outside of the BYU Religion department, e.g., Brant Gardner, Noel B. Reynolds, and John Gee.

appendix, but only a single,<sup>16</sup> must-read reference from the *Interpreter*, David M. Belnap’s summary essay entitled, “The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon,” a 175-page article that advances the chapter-five agenda in *Book of Mormon Studies*.<sup>17</sup> Further, most articles cited from the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* come from 2017 or later; earlier papers advocating for historicity are not cited. Finally, the description of *Interpreter* in *Book of Mormon Studies* is far from kind. The journal is positioned in the book as a backward-looking publication in which FARMS retreads who have nothing new to say<sup>18</sup> publish marginally relevant historicity papers. In one place, they even get the name of the journal wrong, calling it the *Mormon Interpreter* (p. 40). Here is what *Book of Mormon Studies* has to say about *Interpreter*:

**Theory/Approach:** The Book of Mormon is an ancient document, as will be demonstrated through comparative study of the text and ancient Near Eastern documents and sources. **Major Figures/Movements:** High Nibley and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies in the twentieth century; scholars publishing in the *Interpreter* in the twenty-first century. (p. 41)

As publications in the *Mormon Interpreter*<sup>19</sup> (later renamed *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*) show, there nevertheless remains much work to do on the historical origins of the Book of Mormon. (p. 40)

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16. There are more references in the appendix to *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* than to the *Interpreter*.

17. David M. Belnap, “The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 195–370, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-inclusive-anti-discrimination-message-of-the-book-of-mormon/>.

18. “There’s seldom much that’s new these days in the battle over the Book of Mormon’s historicity ... [D]efenders today tend to retread the ground of their own scholarly forbears while adding few substantially new arguments or evidence” (p. 111). To be sure, they also state that “there nonetheless remains much work to do on the historical origins of the Book of Mormon — especially to tame the zeal of amateur archaeologists who claim more than the evidence allows” (p. 40). This concession is mostly just another attack on those who think historicity is an essential issue.

19. The original name of the journal was *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, not the *Mormon Interpreter*. The title was changed in accord with President Russell M. Nelson’s call to use the official Church name.

The *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* publishes a good deal of scholarship on the Book of Mormon, most of it in the vein of traditional twentieth-century scholarship. (p. 153)

The reason, then, for privileging the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* over the *Interpreter* in *Book of Mormon Studies* is that the former is *avant garde* and the latter is backward-looking.

This privileging of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* does not seem to be warranted by impact on the discipline of Book of Mormon studies, as measured by a citation analysis. Articles in *Interpreter* are likely to be cited twice as often as articles appearing in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. Using Harzing's *Publish or Perish* software,<sup>20</sup> I pulled all articles that have citation data from Google Scholar from 2012 to 2018 from the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* and compared them with articles about the Book of Mormon published in the *Interpreter* during the same period. Newer articles are cited less frequently than older articles, so I did not include anything newer than 2018. Also, older articles are cited more frequently, as they have been around longer, so I did not look at articles published before 2012.<sup>21</sup>

The *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* published 35 articles of all types that were cited at least once during that time period, for a total of 91 citations, or 2.68 citations per article. *Interpreter* published 69 articles focusing on the Book of Mormon that were cited at least once during that time period, for a total of 391 citations, or an average of 5.75 citations per article — more than double the citation rate of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. I believe that the influence of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* will continue to wane, because it is now locked behind a paywall and is not freely available to the three target audiences described at the beginning of *Book of Mormon Studies*. This same analysis suggests a bright, impactful future for *Interpreter*. This blindness towards the *Interpreter* is one example of the authors' unconscious bias.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Version 8; harzing.com.

21. As well, The Interpreter Foundation was not organized until August 2012, with its journal launched at the same time. There would have been no citations to *Interpreter* articles before this time.

22. Indeed, as one reviewer of this article pointed out, the authors of *Book of Mormon Studies* seem to portray *Interpreter* as a historicity journal, which suggests they are largely unfamiliar with its contents. There are many *Interpreter* papers on the Book of Mormon that do not touch on historicity (for example, see footnotes 9, 17, 27, 28, and 32 in this article). And though I am trying to practice the academic

## The Book of Mormon as Temple Text

In the discussions about the major questions being asked in the twenty-first century, the authors ignored several very big questions that are important to many readers and scholars, including the Book of Mormon as a temple text.

*Book of Mormon Studies* describes John W. Welch's book, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*,<sup>23</sup> as "essential" (p. 144). In his book, Welch examines the Sermon at the Temple in the Book of Mormon as a temple text. This laid the foundation for other studies that followed. At approximately the same time, non-member scholar Margaret Barker was illuminating the function of the Old Testament temple in several books and papers.<sup>24</sup> Building on the work of Welch and Barker, noted science fiction author D. John Butler attempted to fully illuminate the temple text in the Book of Mormon, particularly in 1 Nephi 8–14, 2 Nephi 4, several chapters in Alma (29, 30, 37, 45, 46), Helaman 5, Ether 3 and in other places.<sup>25</sup> According to Butler,

We're collectively on the brink of realizing that the Book of Mormon is a temple book. *Plain and Precious Things* set out a paradigm for studying the Book of Mormon as temple literature, which is to say an overarching idea that the Book of Mormon was written by temple worshippers for temple worshippers, in the imagery of the temple, and teaching temple doctrines. Without seeing the temple in it, we can't fully understand the Book of Mormon.<sup>26</sup>

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charity they advocate in *Book of Mormon Studies*, this may also be evidence that they are not as well-versed in the universe of Book of Mormon research as they hold themselves out to be.

23. John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-day Saint Approach* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990).

24. For a review of Barker's scholarship, see Kevin Christensen, "Twenty Years After 'Paradigms Regained,' Part 1: The Ongoing, Plain, and Precious Significance of Margaret Barker's Scholarship for Latter-day Saint Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 54 (2022): 1–64, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/twenty-years-after-paradigms-regained-part-1-the-ongoing-plain-and-precious-significance-of-margaret-barkers-scholarship-for-latter-day-saint-studies/>.

25. D. John Butler, *Plain and Precious Things: The Temple Religion of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men*, self-published, 2012, and *The Goodness and the Mysteries: On the Path of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men*, self-published 2012.

26. *Goodness and the Mysteries*, 1.



Other scholars have also come to the same conclusion. Bokovoy argues that the interaction between Nephi and the Spirit of the Lord in 1 Nephi 11 is a temple text.<sup>27</sup> He followed up with another article about temple imagery in Jacob’s sermons.<sup>28</sup> Don Bradley’s *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing Stories*, described by *Book of Mormon Studies* as “particularly unique and celebrated” (p. 141), has two chapters on temple allusions in the Book of Mormon. Joseph M. Spencer, one of the authors of *Book of Mormon Studies*, gives a unique, Latter-day Saint temple reading of Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16).<sup>29</sup> In another book, Spencer provides an interpretation of 1 and 2 Nephi as creation, fall, atonement, and veil. He concludes “that Nephi’s whole record is oriented by and structured around this most crucial, clearly temple-centered theme.”<sup>30</sup> The Book of Mormon as temple text is an area ripe for future research.

### **Mother in Heaven**

As the *Book of Mormon Studies* authors seek to find the feminine in the Book of Mormon, they have left out any mention of Mother in Heaven. “Mother in Heaven,” says Val Larsen, “is remarkably visible in the Book of Mormon.”<sup>31</sup> Hints about Mother in Heaven are particularly strong in the Book of Mormon when talking about the tree of life in Lehi’s

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27. David E. Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest that I Believe’: Invoking the Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11, *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 1–23, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/thou-knowest-that-i-believe/>.

28. David E. Bokovoy, “Ancient Temple Imagery in the Sermons of Jacob,” in *Temple Insights: Proceedings of the Interpreter Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference, “The Temple on Mount Zion*, eds. William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 171–86. Recently reprinted in the *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021): 31–46, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/ancient-temple-imagery-in-the-sermons-of-jacob/>.

29. Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 167–78.

30. Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Studies, 2016), 57.

31. Val Larsen, “Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture,” *SquareTwo*, Vol. 8 No. 2 (Summer 2015), <https://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleLarsenHeavenlyMother.html>.

dream and Nephi's vision, as Larsen has pointed out upon at least four occasions.<sup>32</sup>

Much of the groundwork for scholarly studies on Mother in Heaven was laid by Margaret Barker in her many books about the temple<sup>33</sup> and by Kevin Christensen, who first brought her to the attention of Restoration scholars.<sup>34</sup> Daniel C. Peterson's work on this topic was seminal.<sup>35</sup> Studying Mother in Heaven imagery in the Book of Mormon would go a long way to countering the other, prominent, negative female symbol in the Book of Mormon: "the mother of abominations" and "the whore of all the earth" (1 Nephi 14:9–12). This is another potentially fruitful area of research not mentioned in *Book of Mormon Studies*.

### Missing Discussion of Research Tools

A missing area in the appendix for would-be Book of Mormon scholars is a section on research tools. For example, WordCruncher<sup>36</sup> is an indispensable search tool for my scholarly research into the Book of Mormon and other documents<sup>37</sup> but is not mentioned in *Book of Mormon*

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32. In addition to his "Hidden in Plain View" article, see Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting the Greater Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 44–51, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/first-visions-and-last-sermons-affirming-divine-sociality-rejecting-the-greater-apostasy/>; Val Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 226–35, 264, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni/>; and my forthcoming article in the *Interpreter*, co-authored with Val Larsen, "Theosis in the Book of Mormon: The Work and Glory of the Father, Mother and Son, and Holy Ghost."

33. For example, Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord: Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2012). Note that Margaret Barker was featured in a YouTube.com video produced by the church and displayed on the official church YouTube.com channel about the temple. See "Temples through Time," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6a10hpWeZA>.

34. Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *Occasional Papers* 2 (2001), 1–94, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/paradigms-regained-survey-margaret-barkers-scholarship-and-its-significance-mormon-studies>.

35. Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25, 80–81, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss2/4/>.

36. Available for free download at <https://wordcruncher.com/>.

37. See <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/wordcruncher/> for a long list of WordCruncher compatible documents.

*Studies*. WordCruncher lets one search, study, and analyze words or phrases in many helpful ways.

Another indispensable tool is the 1828 *Webster's Dictionary*.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of where they come down on the question of historicity, Book of Mormon scholars should be attentive to the meaning of English words used in the book at the time when it was first published. In my own reading of the book, a week rarely goes by without consulting this dictionary at least once or twice.

As a specialist in qualitative research, I have also found text management tools to be enormously useful. My favorite is NVivo,<sup>39</sup> which allows one to manage large volumes of textual material, as well as graphics and video. It does not generate interpretations of the data — that is the scholar's job — but it helps one tag and organize data and identify intertextual linkages that enrich the meaning of a passage or that develop themes across a set of related passages.

Though I do not pretend to be a scholar of Hebrew, Greek, or other ancient semitic languages, I do find some language tools helpful in my study of the Book of Mormon and the Bible. One free, online, go-to resource I use is the Polyglot Bible.<sup>40</sup> Most words in the Old and New Testaments are rendered in Hebrew or Greek and described and explained in English. When I question how a word or phrase in the Book of Mormon is used in the Old or New Testaments, I turn to the Polyglot Bible. Other similar tools are available, either freely or for purchase.

Another useful tool for believing scholars is the Scripture Citation Index.<sup>41</sup> Each time a prophet, apostle, or other general authority cites a verse of scripture in a General Conference talk, that use is linked in this index, which includes conference addresses from 1942 onward, plus *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* and the complete *Journal of Discourses*. One lesson I have learned from using the Scripture Citation Index is that many, many verses of scripture have never been commented upon by Church authorities, especially in the Old Testament. But even in the Book of Mormon, entire chapters exist without authoritative comment (e.g., 2 Nephi 20; Alma 52 and 59; Helaman 1; and 3 Nephi 3) and many chapters have only one or a few references, meaning there are many comment-free verses to ponder. Even when there is a reference to

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38. Available online at <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/>.

39. To purchase NVivo, visit <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home>. They offer a free, one-week trial.

40. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/poly/>.

41. <https://scriptures.byu.edu>.

a particular verse, the authoritative commenter often offers a different interpretation than the one I am considering. This leaves much room for speculation, especially for theological research.

There are other useful research tools that could have been highlighted in the book, perhaps in the appendix, but were not.

### **The Gatekeeper Problem**

Another problem with the book and its contents is that it feels somewhat inbred. I greatly admire much of the work done by the authors, but I also admire work done by other scholars not affiliated with the organizations in which the authors exercise gatekeeping power. The authors have been remarkably productive researchers and have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the Book of Mormon, but so have others unaffiliated with the Maxwell Institute, the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar, and the Academy of Book of Mormon Studies. The authors of *Book of Mormon Studies* complain<sup>42</sup> about too restrictive gatekeeping and a lack of openness to alternative perspectives in the FARMS era. Whether those concerns have merit, the authors themselves generally include in their list of contemporary scholarship work primarily done by the authors and others affiliated with the organizations in which they serve as principals. The value of their survey would be greater if their canon of worthwhile research were more open and broader.

### **Summary**

*Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide* is a very useful history of and future agenda for Book of Mormon studies in the twenty-first century. It was written by Book of Mormon scholars and features new and continuing research on the Book of Mormon. While the scope of the work is more limited than it should be, I highly recommend the book for anyone who is a serious student of the Book of Mormon.

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42. “Still more worrisome is a further temptation: to allow defense of the Book of Mormon to become a kind of gatekeeping *among* the saints. That is, far too often accusations are made by one believer about another. Whether they’re written and published or whether they’re just whispered into individual ears in quieter settings, such accusations should have no place in the field of Book of Mormon studies” (p. 75).

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