



Type: Journal Article

---

## Feasting on the Book of Mormon

Author(s): Stephen O. Smoot

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,  
Volume 31 (2019), pp. 143-150

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

---

**Abstract:** The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship has recently published a new study edition of the Book of Mormon. Edited by Grant Hardy, the *Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (MISE) incorporates important advances in Book of Mormon scholarship from the past few decades while grounding the reader's experience in the text of the Book of Mormon. The reformatted text presented in the MISE improves the readability of the Book of Mormon, while footnotes, charts, bibliographies, and short explanatory essays highlight the strides made in recent years related to Book of Mormon scholarship. The MISE is a phenomenal edition of the Book of Mormon that is representative of the sort of close attention and care Latter-day Saints should be giving the text.

# INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT  
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 31 · 2019 · Pages 143 - 150

## Feasting on the Book of Mormon

Stephen O. Smoot

Offprint Series

© 2019 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at [InterpreterFoundation.org](http://InterpreterFoundation.org). You can find other articles published in our journal at [Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org](http://Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org). You may subscribe to this journal at [InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription](http://InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription).

# FEASTING ON THE BOOK OF MORMON

---

Stephen O. Smoot

**Abstract:** *The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship has recently published a new study edition of the Book of Mormon. Edited by Grant Hardy, the Maxwell Institute Study Edition (MISE) incorporates important advances in Book of Mormon scholarship from the past few decades while grounding the reader's experience in the text of the Book of Mormon. The reformatted text presented in the MISE improves the readability of the Book of Mormon, while footnotes, charts, bibliographies, and short explanatory essays highlight the strides made in recent years related to Book of Mormon scholarship. The MISE is a phenomenal edition of the Book of Mormon that is representative of the sort of close attention and care Latter-day Saints should be giving the text.*

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).

Whether reading it as an act of piety, out of a desire to debunk its pretensions to divine revelation, or as an exercise in academic curiosity, one thing cannot be denied: the thoughtless handwaving and blithe dismissal past critics had for the Book of Mormon can no longer be seriously entertained. We are long past the days when the Book of Mormon can be feasibly deemed “a bungling and stupid production ... [with] nothing to commend it to a thinking mind,”<sup>1</sup> or

---

1. “The Mormons,” *The Episcopal Recorder* 18, no. 7 (Philadelphia, April 9, 1840).

“a yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless, and inconceivably absurd.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, an informed, intelligent, and fair-minded evaluation of the book reveals “a remarkable text ... worthy of serious study,”<sup>3</sup> a text that “should rank among the great achievements of American literature,”<sup>4</sup> indeed, “a fascinating tale well worth reading for a number of reasons”<sup>5</sup> that tells a “dramatic story in a fine biblical style.”<sup>6</sup>

As such, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should avail themselves of resources that will enhance their study of the Book of Mormon in a manner befitting the book’s importance. Latter-day Saints are obliged by prophetic command to seek “out of the best books words of wisdom” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118). If they do not, if they treat the Book of Mormon lightly or “trifle with sacred things” intellectually as well as spiritually, they are liable to bring themselves and “the whole Church under condemnation” for having squandered “this great and marvelous gift the Lord has given to us.”<sup>7</sup>

The latest publication that seeks to engage the Book of Mormon is Grant Hardy’s new *Maxwell Institute Study Edition*.<sup>8</sup> The MISE, to borrow a useful acronym from Blair Hodges,<sup>9</sup> aims to help its intended Latter-day Saint readers “learn to read this sacred text as carefully as possible, with detailed attention to language, structure, and historical context,” the desired outcome for readers that “its message of salvation

---

2. Bernard DeVoto, “The Centennial of Mormonism,” *American Mercury* 19, no. 73 (January 1930), 5.

3. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 273.

4. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848*, *The Oxford History of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.

5. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, “Introduction,” in *The Book of Mormon*, trans. Joseph Smith, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), viii.

6. “Freeman Dyson: By the Book,” *New York Times* (April 16, 2015), [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/books/review/19bkr-bythebook\\_dyson.t.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/books/review/19bkr-bythebook_dyson.t.html).

7. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon — Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign* (November 1986), 6, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1986/11/the-book-of-mormon-keystone-of-our-religion>.

8. Grant Hardy, ed. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2018). Citations of this volume appear in the body of this review.

9. Blair Dee Hodges, “A Marvelous New Book of Mormon Study Edition,” *BYU Religious Education Review* (Fall 2018), 12–15, 33, <https://rsc.byu.edu/review/fall-2018/marvelous-new-book-mormon-study-edition>.

through Jesus Christ will become more compelling and its lessons for life more clear” (xvii). Hardy is certainly well-prepared to guide readers through the Book of Mormon. “In 2003, Hardy published his *Reader’s Edition* of the Book of Mormon with the University of Illinois Press to help scholars and students of other faiths engage more closely with” the book.<sup>10</sup> This edition has accomplished its purposes well, having become a valuable resource for Book of Mormon scholarship.<sup>11</sup> Hardy has likewise produced an important monograph that analyzes the Book of Mormon from the perspective of literary theory and criticism.<sup>12</sup> Himself a committed member of the Church who recognizes the need for unflinching intellectual honesty while also respecting faith,<sup>13</sup> it would be no exaggeration to say Hardy is one of the best-prepared individuals to offer a study edition of the Book of Mormon for Latter-day Saints.

The *MISE* “reproduces the official 1981 (2013) text exactly, aside from the modifications in punctuation needed for the addition of quotation marks and poetic stanzas” (xvi). That Hardy was given a license by the Church to use its official text of the Book of Mormon, besides the fact that the *MISE* is published by a Church-sponsored academic institution, should quickly assuage any doubts readers may have about whether Church leaders feel it is appropriate to undertake a critical study of the Book of Mormon. In fact, besides offering bibliographies of scholarly resources on the Book of Mormon (xvii–xviii, 624), the *MISE* also directs its readers’ attention to official “[Latter-day Saint] resources on the history, transmission, and translation of the Book of Mormon” in the form of the Joseph Smith Papers website and the Gospel Topics essays (xviii). Latter-day Saint readers may therefore rest assured, knowing that the *MISE* represents a synthesis of some of the best institutional and independent research on the Book of Mormon available.

In terms of structure, the *MISE* foregoes the traditional versified double columns Latter-day Saints are familiar with and opts for a reformatted layout that includes “original chapter divisions (since these were apparently on the gold plates and thus were intended by the ancient authors), modern paragraphing, superscripted verse numbers,

---

10. Hodges, “A Marvelous New Book of Mormon Study Edition,” 12.

11. Kevin L. Barney, “An Elegant Presentation,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004), 1–10. The 25th volume of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (2016) is devoted entirely to evaluating Hardy’s impact with his *Reader’s Edition* and other publications.

12. See Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

13. Hardy’s testimony can be read online at <https://www.fairmormon.org/testimonies/scholars/grant-hardy>.

indentation of embedded documents, a hypothetical map based on internal references, and multi-chapter and section headings that highlight the narrative context and structure” (xvi–xvii). Accompanying “footnotes point out textual variants, direct quotations, references to specific events, chronological markers, alternative punctuation, and a few explanations of language, literary forms, and transmission” (xvii). While “these explanations represent only a sampling of the kinds of features that could be observed from close readings of the text,” they nevertheless highlight “the narrative complexity and coherence of the Book of Mormon,” which in turn “offer[s] some of the strongest evidences of its historicity and miraculous translation” (xvii).<sup>14</sup> For this reason alone, Latter-day Saints should be very interested in picking up a copy of the *MISE*.

Another key component to the *MISE* is the incorporation of Royal Skousen’s fundamentally important Book of Mormon Critical Text Project. Skousen, “a professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, is the central figure in the academic analysis of the Book of Mormon text, including its origins, transmission, variants, and grammar” (xvi). Any reliable study edition of the Book of Mormon must utilize Skousen’s work, which Hardy of course recognizes:

The footnotes [in the *MISE*] highlight instances in which earlier readings of the original and printer’s manuscripts may be more accurate, clearer, or more felicitous. All of the textual notes in this edition are derived from Skousen’s work, as are many of the suggestions for alternative punctuation and word order. The notes here, however, are simplified, dispensing with Skousen’s indications of variants within a source, original and corrected readings in the manuscripts, spelling anomalies, and types of manuscript changes. (xvi)

This acknowledgement serves nicely in giving general readers some exposure to Skousen’s voluminous work without overwhelming them with the finer technical points of his scholarship. The *MISE* thus balances well the need to make the Book of Mormon readable while also providing useful critical notes.

The maps and charts provided as appendices in the *MISE* are helpful study aids that should help readers better visualize the Book of Mormon, keep straight its underlying sources and transmission process, and

---

14. On this point, see Daniel C. Peterson, “An Apologetically Important Nonapologetic Book,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 25 (2016): 52–75.

remain grounded in both its internal chronology and the chronology of its translation and publication in the nineteenth century (599–610). The reproduction of primary sources from Joseph Smith and others involved in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (including Emma Smith, Martin Harris, Lucy Mack Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, Mary Musselman Whitmer, and Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery) is likewise helpful and may give readers a glimpse into the rich documentary record connected to the same (611–19).

Perhaps the most noticeable difference between the *MISE* and Hardy's 2003 *Reader's Edition* is the "general notes" that appear toward the end of the book (620–624). Topics discussed include "anachronisms," "chronology," "coherence," "demographics," "geography," "language," "translation," and "witnesses." In each case Hardy summarizes the issue and provides a plausible answer provided by Latter-day Saint apologists. For example, after listing the most commonly mentioned anachronisms in the Book of Mormon ("horses, elephants, cattle, sheep, goats, swine, barley, wheat, steel, silk, swords, and chariots"), Hardy writes,

Several of these [anachronistic] items are mentioned only in passing, and it may be that the attention of the translator was focused on other, more significant matters. The King James Bible similarly includes anachronistic references to silk, steel, brass, and candles, and the Book of Mormon follows that translation in many respects. Or familiar terms may have been used to represent things unknown to the early Nephite settlers or to readers in Joseph Smith's day, as happened when the Spaniards first encountered New World animals, plants, and artifacts. For instance, many of the "swords" in the Book of Mormon could have been *macuahuitl* — wooden clubs embedded with obsidian blades (such weapons, unlike metal swords, could be stained with blood, as at Alma 24:12–15). Some of the anachronistic items may have had very limited production, though it is possible future discoveries will validate at least a few. References to cement at Helaman 11 were long thought to be anachronistic but have since been amply documented in Mesoamerica of the first century BC, and a New World species of barley was confirmed in the 1980s (though not yet in Mesoamerica). Perhaps the most troublesome of the commonly mentioned anachronisms is horses, which Joseph Smith certainly had experience with, yet there may be more to the story. The Nephite scripture



mentions horses in ten verses (aside from biblical quotations), but no one in the Book of Mormon is ever said to have ridden a horse. This is odd from a nineteenth-century American perspective. In any case, lists of apparent anachronisms should be considered alongside lists of correspondences with the ancient Americas such as roads, large cities, seasonal warfare, earthwork and timber fortifications, and sophisticated writing systems as well as cultural connections to the ancient Near East recognized only after the publication of the Book of Mormon, including prophetic commission and covenant patterns (1 Nephi 1, Mos 2–6), literary devices (e.g., 2 Nephi 4, Alma 6), a few Hebrew and Egyptian names (e.g., Nephi, Sariah, Mosiah, Alma, Jershon, Paanchi), and details regarding ancient olive cultivation (Jacob). (620)

This essentially boils down the apologetic answer given by believing Latter-day Saint scholars on the issue of Book of Mormon anachronisms since at least the early work of Hugh Nibley and John L. Sorenson. Hardy's purpose with the *MISE*, however, is not to get bogged down in polemics, so he keeps his discussion of apologetic issues to a minimum (enough to raise the points being debated and spark readers' interest by giving a concise summary) and instead directs interested readers' attention to a bibliography and online sites that offer "valuable resources for Book of Mormon scholarship" (624).<sup>15</sup> That Hardy included this material in the *MISE* seems to clearly indicate that his intended audience is not the same as that for his *Reader's Edition*. Since it is at times both overtly pastoral and overtly apologetic, the *MISE* is geared toward a mainline Latter-day Saint readership, as opposed to the inter-faith and academic readership intended with the *Reader's Edition*.

The design quality and look of the *MISE* is nothing short of superb. The type is crisp, the layout clean, and the notes and critical apparatus nonintrusive. This minimalism ensures that the reader is not distracted from what should be the main focus: the text. The original woodcuts by noted Latter-day Saint artist Brian Kershnik that illustrate the *MISE* amplify its aesthetic appeal. In short, the *MISE* looks good; an obvious care for aesthetic detail has gone into its production.

Lest I am misunderstood by my earlier comments, let me be clear that I by no means suggest that those who do not pick up a copy of

---

15. Hardy recommends in particular the Neal A. Maxwell Institute, the Religious Studies Center at BYU, the Interpreter Foundation, and Book of Mormon Central.

the *MISE* will suffer divine punishment. Rather, I am saying that the sort of serious, close, careful, and thoughtful analysis and presentation Hardy gives the Book of Mormon with his new study edition is *precisely* the sort of engagement with the book that Latter-day Saints are obliged to undertake; both for their own sake as well as for ensuring that the Book of Mormon is received positively by non-Latter-day Saints. We Latter-day Saints do ourselves no favors in presenting the Book of Mormon to the world in a sloppy, amateurish, or uncritical manner that is likely to turn the book into a stumbling block rather than a foundation for admiration and testimony.

So, while one does not necessarily have to read the *MISE* to gain a testimony of the Book of Mormon (or even just a basic appreciation for it), reading it certainly wouldn't hurt. In fact, I cannot imagine how anyone (except perhaps the most doggedly cynical) could engage the *MISE* without having their opinion of the Book of Mormon elevated. For members of the Church who already have a testimony, I likewise cannot imagine how any who took the time to become familiar with the *MISE* would not have their testimony strengthened. I can therefore unreservedly recommend the *MISE* to anyone wishing to gain more from their study of the Book of Mormon.

**Stephen O. Smoot** graduated from the University of Toronto with a master's degree in Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. He previously graduated cum laude from Brigham Young University with bachelor's degrees in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and German Studies. His areas of academic interest include the Hebrew Bible, ancient Egypt, and Mormon studies. He is an editorial consultant with *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* and blogs on Latter-day Saint topics at [www.plonialmonimormon.com](http://www.plonialmonimormon.com).

