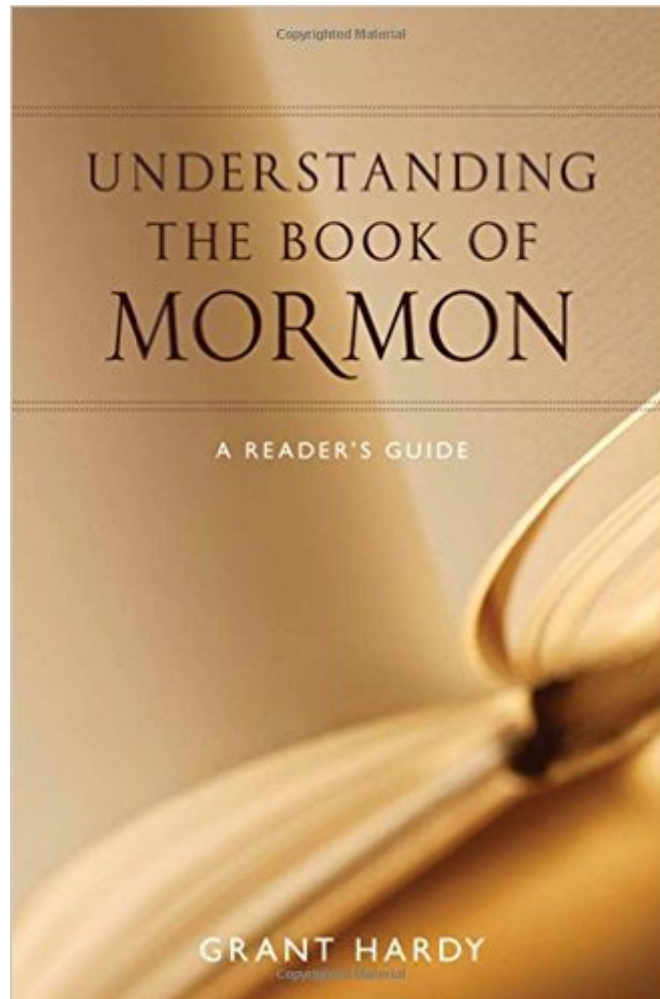


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Understanding The Book Of Mormon: A Reader's Guide



Synopsis

Mark Twain once derided the Book of Mormon as "chloroform in print." Long and complicated, written in the language of the King James version of the Bible, it boggles the minds of many. Yet it is unquestionably one of the most influential books ever written. With over 140 million copies in print, it is a central text of one of the largest and fastest-growing faiths in the world. And, Grant Hardy shows, it's far from the coma-inducing doorstop caricatured by Twain. In *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Hardy offers the first comprehensive analysis of the work's narrative structure in its 180 year history. Unlike virtually all other recent world scriptures, the Book of Mormon presents itself as an integrated narrative rather than a series of doctrinal expositions, moral injunctions, or devotional hymns. Hardy takes readers through its characters, events, and ideas, as he explores the story and its messages. He identifies the book's literary techniques, such as characterization, embedded documents, allusions, and parallel narratives. Whether Joseph Smith is regarded as author or translator, it's noteworthy that he never speaks in his own voice; rather, he mediates nearly everything through the narrators Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. Hardy shows how each has a distinctive voice, and all are woven into an integral whole. As with any scripture, the contending views of the Book of Mormon can seem irreconcilable. For believers, it is an actual historical document, transmitted from ancient America. For nonbelievers, it is the work of a nineteenth-century farmer from upstate New York. Hardy transcends this intractable conflict by offering a literary approach, one appropriate to both history and fiction. Regardless of whether readers are interested in American history, literature, comparative religion, or even salvation, he writes, the book can best be read if we examine the text on its own terms.

Book Information

Hardcover: 368 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (April 7, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199731705

ISBN-13: 978-0199731701

Product Dimensions: 9.3 x 1.4 x 6.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (63 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #257,794 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #381 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Mormonism](#) #590 in [Books > Textbooks >](#)

Customer Reviews

In one corner Skeptical-Critic shuffles his feet as he knocks his gloves together. In the other corner Believer- Apologist ghosts jabs, bobbing up and down. At the back of the arena Indifferent-Non-believer and Didactic-Believer glance in the direction of the main event, feeling a little out of place. Standing at center ring is the Book of Mormon, America's most unique and prolific scriptural production. In the middle of this epic bout Grant Hardy calls a timeout with his new book *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*. He attempts the double-task of convincing non-Mormons that the Book of Mormon is worth the effort of serious analysis while convincing Mormons that searching their sacred book can yield more than didactic homilies or proofs of ancient authenticity. Granting the importance of the main event, he offers a different venue altogether. By reading closely, Hardy guides readers through novel readings not found in other studies of the Book of Mormon. For instance, he observes that "Alma or Mormon (or Joseph Smith) has structured the first two-thirds of the book of Alma according to a series of parallels" (304). Alma 4-16 includes three sermons delivered to three different cities. Alma 36-42 includes Alma's three charges to three different sons (Alma 36-42). The sermons and charges overlap in theme, respective length, order, and source (primary documents are utilized in each case). This city/son parallel is even more interesting considering Alma preached in five cities but only three accounts are included in the narrative. Altogether, this indicates remarkable coincidence or deliberate construction: Zarahemla/Helaman (morally ambiguous), Gideon/Shiblon (clearly righteous, shortest), Ammonihah/Corianton (clearly wicked, longest).

The premise of the book is that relatively few readers of the Book of Mormon, whether Mormons or non-Mormons, study the book to understand it as a composition in its own right. People mostly give it a quick read to confirm their belief\disbelief in the LDS or Mormon Church's claim to be divinely organized and run. The author feels that in reading the Book of Mormon that way, much of the meaning and almost all of the nuances of the book are missed completely. His effort treats the Book of Mormon as susceptible to the same analysis as is used on works of historical fiction. He makes the point a number of times, that it makes no difference to understanding Mormon's motivations, as to whether he was a literary creation of Joseph Smith or a true historical figure. This will, no doubt, irritate both some believers and some non-believers, who want to proceed quickly to a conclusion about the origin of the Book of Mormon and therefore the validity of the LDS Church as a divinely

organized church. As the key to understanding the Book of Mormon, this book discusses the three main narrators: Nephi, Mormon and Moroni, beginning with their different narrative styles and aims. Many examples are given to support the book's assertion that the narrators' lives influenced their style and aims. Nephi, for example, wrote his portion later in his life, after he knew that his lineage would fail and die out. His writings were intended to inspire the descendants of his unrighteous brothers. Mormon, on the other hand, was the historian, who, in addition to the careful recording of important names, places and events, selected a number of comparisons of good followers with inspired followers. His point was to underscore the importance of divine inspiration.

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