

Reasonably Good Tidings of Greater-than-Average Joy

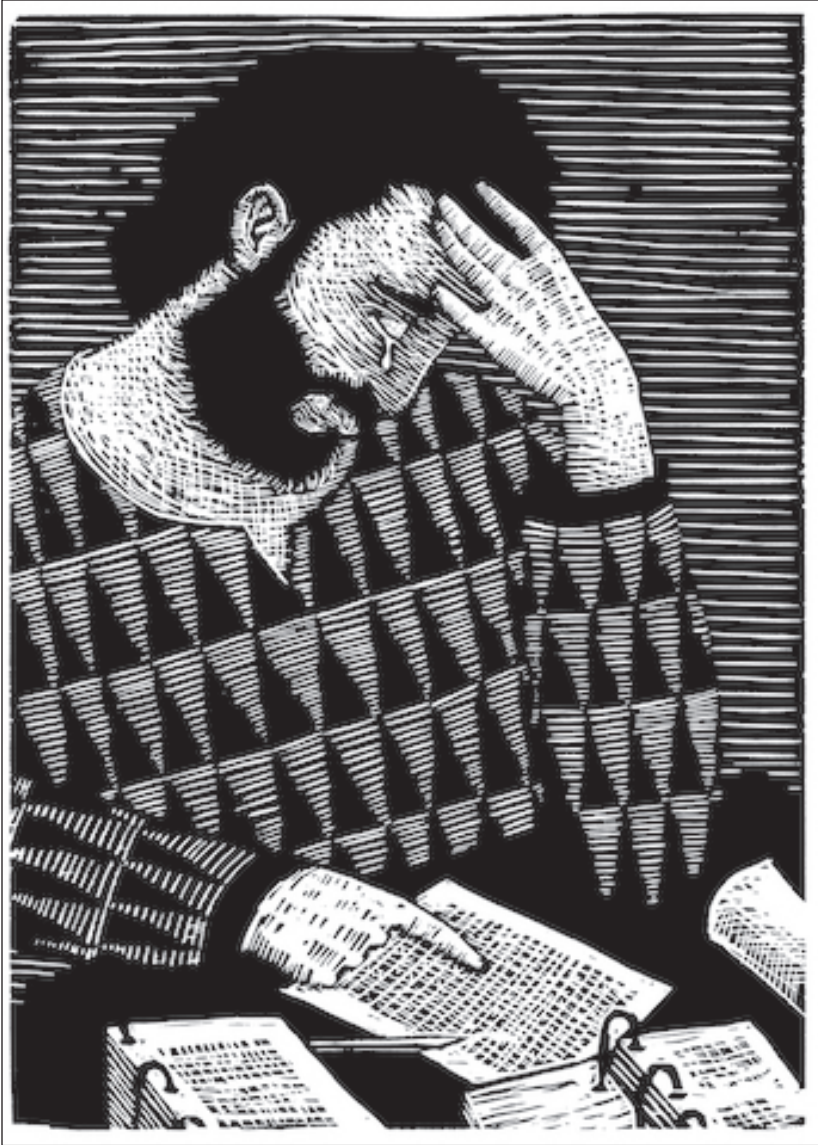
Grant Hardy, ed. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, Maxwell Institute Study Edition*. Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018. Illustrated by Brian Kershnik. 600 pp. Paperback: \$32.18. Kindle: \$27.99. ISBN: 978-1944394653.

Reviewed by Michael Austin

For serious readers of scripture, the publication of a major study edition is cause for great rejoicing. The *HarperCollins Study Bible* and the major Oxford Study Bibles (the *Jewish Study Bible*, the *Catholic Study Bible*, and the REB-based *Oxford Study Bible*) are classics of scholarly editing with dozens of contributors and hundreds of features that facilitate deep engagement with the text. And Harper's recent *Study Qur'an* manages to squeeze 1300 years of Islamic commentary into 2000 pages at a ratio of about four inches of footnotes to every inch of text.

The Maxwell Institute's Study Edition of the Book of Mormon—edited by Grant Hardy and jointly published by Deseret Books and the BYU Religious Studies Center—is not quite as extensive or groundbreaking as these other volumes. It contains only a modest scholarly apparatus, and it borrows much of its textual organization from Hardy's earlier *Reader's Edition of the Book of Mormon* published by the University of Illinois Press in 2005. But it is still a cause for moderate-to-pretty-good rejoicing. It is an excellent resource for serious gospel study and a surprisingly reader-friendly presentation of the text of the Book of Mormon.

The Maxwell Study Edition is a well-designed and attractive book, beginning with the artwork on the cover and placed throughout the text. Latter-day Saint artist Brian Kershnik created nineteen original woodcut



Sad scholar © Brian Kershnik, 2018. Used with permission.

images to accompany the *Study Edition*. These images are both serious and beautiful, and they bring a dignity to the work that immediately sets it apart from other editions. For those of us raised on the Arnold Friberg's illustrations—with their Arnold Schwarzenegger Nephites and Jay Silverheels Lamanites—Kershisnik's woodcuts do the work of redemption. They allow us to associate our sacred text with images as graceful and thoughtful as the words that they illustrate.

But design considerations for a book like this go well beyond the aesthetic pleasures of good artwork. Layout and typeface convey information, and the goal of a study edition is to present as much information as possible without overwhelming or confusing the reader. A badly designed study edition will footnote everything and direct readers to the bottom of the page—or, worse, to the end of the book—for commentary and additional explanation. A well-designed book finds ways to incorporate this information seamlessly into the text with different layouts, typefaces, and inline images—which is precisely what Hardy and the Maxwell Institute designers have done with this book.

Here are the major ways that the text has been designed to enhance the reading experience and maximize the information conveyed on each page. Design elements marked with an asterisk represent features also available in Hardy's 2005 *Readers Edition*:

* The text is printed in logical paragraphs with verse numbers in superscript. This allows readers to encounter the text as a coherent narrative, much as the readers of the first editions of the Book of Mormon encountered it. Unlike the pre-1879 editions, though, the paragraphs are not 2–3-page monstrosities with only an occasional punctuation mark to let the reader catch a breath. Hardy has done the significant editorial work of crafting logical paragraphs that divide the text into manageable chunks, making the reading experience more coherent than the standard edition with 1–2 sentence verses throughout, and much less frustrating than the various first-edition facsimiles with the paragraphs that E.B. Grandin created in 1830.

•* The text is broken into several levels of headings independent of the standard chapter-and-verse organization. Chapter numbers are included in the left margin, but each book is further organized and divided using three heading levels, each with its own distinct typeface. So, for example, the text from Alma 9–14 is grouped under the large heading: “Alma and Amulek’s Preaching at Ammonihah” (265). This section is further divided into sections such as “Alma’s Sermon at Ammonihah” (265) “Amulek’s Sermon at Ammonihah” (268), and “Alma’s Answer to Antionah” (276). And these sub-sections are further divided into 3–4 paragraph scenes with helpful, interpretive titles like “Amulek’s words are misconstrued” (270), “A Digression on the Nephite Legal and Monetary System (271), and “Zeezrom Questions Amulek” (272). These heading levels are enormously helpful, as they provide a series of constant reference points for understanding the way that the text is organized and for keeping the larger story in mind while reading the specific details and doctrinal arguments.

• Each page is oriented to both the standard chapters and verses and to the original chapter numbers in the 1830 edition. Before Orson Pratt created the now-standard chapters and verses of the Book of Mormon in 1879, the text had no verses and far fewer chapters than it has today. In a feature not available in the 2005 *Reader’s Edition*, the *Study Edition* marks the beginning of the original chapters with brackets and Roman numerals and the beginning of modern chapters with much larger bold text. Both kinds of chapter information are included on the top of each page, allowing readers to orient themselves quickly and easily to any edition of the text.

•* Characters with the same name are identified in section headings by subscript numbers. Hardy identifies characters with the same name with subscript number indicating which character he is referring to. Thus, all headings involving Moroni₁ refer to the military leader, while headings with Moroni₂ are talking about the guy who hid the plates and wrote the final book.

• Lengthy passages based on the King James Version of the Bible include boldface text to indicate significant departures from the source. In every substantial quotation from the KJV—the Isaiah passages in 2 Nephi

and the Sermon on the Mount chapters in 3 Nephi, but also in shorter quotations and paraphrases of biblical passages—Hardy highlights what is different in the Book of Mormon, allowing readers to easily compare the different versions. In other places, the *Study Edition* uses boldface to show where brief passages of the King James Bible are incorporated into the text of the Book of Mormon. This may be the design element with the most potential to confuse readers, as a boldface passage of text may, depending on the context, mean that the words in bold either are exactly the same, or are substantially different, than the words of the King James Bible.

- Textual variants are given in the footnotes. Another unique feature of the *Study Edition* is the inclusion of textual variations from the surviving original manuscript (O) and the Printer’s Manuscript (P). Hardy has based these notes on Royal Skousen’s detailed textual analyses of both versions, and he also includes a number of the textual emendations that Skousen proposes in the six-volume *Analysis of Textual Variations* (2017), each of which “almost certainly corrects a mistake in the earliest manuscripts” (xix). Textual variants combine with occasional cross references and explanatory glosses to create a healthy, but by no means overwhelming body of footnotes to the main text.

- * Poetic passages are rendered as poetry. As he does in the *Reader’s Edition*, Hardy renders some passages of the Book of Mormon as poetry. While this is a standard feature of most modern translations of the Bible, it is much more difficult to do with the Book of Mormon, as we do not have access to the original text, nor do we understand what might have constituted poetry in Reformed Egyptian. As Hardy explains in the back matter, though, he has made editorial decisions based on an understanding of the way that Hebrew poetry works. “When I encountered passages that exhibited heightened emotion, repetition, and parallel phrases that were both grammatically uncomplicated and relatively short,” he writes, “I set them into poetic lines” (629). Though there is no way to know if these editorial decisions reflect the intention of the original authors, they do change the way that we read the text—and they usually change it for the better.



Witness © Brian Kershnik, 2018. Used with permission.

All told, I can find little fault with the way that the *Study Edition* has been shaped to provide a satisfying reading experience with as much information as possible on every page. This is one of the primary functions of any study edition, and this one does it well, perhaps even perfectly.

I cannot give quite the same endorsement for the second standard feature of study editions, which is to provide a rich selection of contextualizing essays and ancillary materials to enhance serious study. The most useful editions employ multiple contributors to synthesize large bodies of scholarship on the origins and composition of different parts of the text, the history of its reception, the way that it interacts with important social issues, its role in contemporary worship, and things like that.

In a Book of Mormon study edition, one might reasonably expect to see contextualizing essays on such topics as the historical connections between Lamanites and American Indians, connections between The Book of Mormon and the Bible, the literary aspects of different parts of the text, the role that it played in American history, the way that it is used in the Community of Christ, the FLDS, and other branches of Mormonism other than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the various arguments for both an ancient and a nineteenth-century understanding of its origins.

Almost none of this appears in the Maxwell Institute edition. The front matter is limited to official statements by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries about the divine origins of the Book of Mormon, and the back matter includes the sorts of maps, charts, and timelines found in seminary and institute manuals—along with more statements by Joseph Smith’s contemporaries, an essay on chiasmus and parallel structure, and one four-page essay addressing (and conclusively resolving) possible historical anachronisms, DNA evidence, nineteenth-century language, and other potential difficulties with the Book of Mormon’s text. Even the bibliographies and suggestions for further reading have been carefully curated to include only official Church sources and scholarship that supports the Church’s conclusions.

Nothing about this should surprise anyone. The *Study Edition* comes with the triple imprimatur of The Neil A. Maxwell Institute, Deseret Book, and the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University. It is an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and this officialness is at once its greatest strength and its greatest weakness.

We cannot ignore the importance of having an official edition that is this good. One always felt a bit naughty bringing something like the 2005 *Reader's Edition* to church. It was published by a secular university press. It used the 1920 public domain version of the text rather than the official 1981 version copyrighted by the Church. And it generally fell into the category of “unapproved materials” for gospel study by orthodox Latter-day Saints. By combining with a serious and thoughtful scholar like Grant Hardy, the Church has produced and authorized a version of its signature scripture that is orders of magnitude more helpful, and more scholarly, than anything it has produced before.

But officialness comes at a cost. Official books must tell official stories, which means that honest discussions of controversies and pressure points—no matter how important they may be to the study and interpretation of the text—cannot become part of the apparatus. But one must be fair: nothing in this book or its marketing pretends otherwise. The Maxwell Institute’s *Study Edition of the Book of Mormon* presents itself—and has been presented by its makers—as a resource that faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can use to enhance their testimony of Book of Mormon. And it performs this task admirably, gracefully, and with scholarly and religious integrity. And this is more than enough reason to celebrate its publication.

