

The Oxford Comment

Episode 86: The Revelation of the Book of Mormon at 200

Jack Dugan 00:04

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as Mormonism, is one of the fastest growing global religions. As of the latest reports, there are over 17 million members, and while it is still predominantly considered an American religion, almost half of those members live outside of the United States.

Jack Dugan 00:22

This September marks the 200th anniversary of the church's founder Joseph Smith's first vision of the angel Moroni and the revelation of the gold plates that Smith would go on to translate and publish as the Book of Mormon, giving birth to a new religion.

Jack Dugan 00:36

This is Jack Dugan with The Oxford Comment.

Jack Dugan 00:39

On today's episode, we're joined by two preeminent scholars on the history and theology of the Latter-day Saints to discuss with us the legacy of Joseph Smith's gold plates, as well as the state of academic scholarship surrounding the Book of Mormon.

Jack Dugan 00:51

Our first guest today is historian Richard Lyman Bushman. Richard is Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia University, and both co-founder and chairman of the board of the Center for Latter-day Saints Arts. His previous books include *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* and *Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction*. His most recent book with Oxford is *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History*, which traces the history of the gold plates over the last two centuries.

Jack Dugan 01:22

Hello, Richard, welcome to The Oxford Comment. Would you mind introducing yourself and the book quickly?

Richard Bushman 01:28

My name is Richard Bushman. I'm a historian; taught at Columbia University. I've written a number of books on many subjects, but, recently, I've been doing work on Latter-day Saint history, wrote a biography of Joseph Smith, and now I've produced this book on Joseph Smith's gold plates.

Jack Dugan 01:49

Wonderful. And this September marks the 200th anniversary of Joseph Smith's vision, when the gold plates were first revealed to him. Could you take a moment and tell us the story and what it means for the history of Mormonism?

Richard Bushman 02:01

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Yes, Joseph Smith was a son in a very poor farm family that migrated to New York from Vermont, to Palmyra, New York, on the Erie Canal, in 1816, and he had very intense religious feelings; had a vision when he was young. And when he was 17 years old, and praying, he tells us, an angel appeared in his room and told him there was a record buried in a hill near his home. And he, the next morning, he went and found the record in a stone box on the side of the hill about two miles away from his home.

Richard Bushman 02:52

And after, wasn't allowed to take it out then, but after four years, he took it home, began to translate it, and after a year and a half, it was finished, and he published it as a, the Book of Mormon. And this is one of the founding stories of Mormonism. It's sort of like the deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea or the resurrection of Christ for Christians. It's sort of one of the founding miracle stories that gave Mormonism its impetus in its early years and down to today.

Jack Dugan 03:34

Can you tell us a little bit more about Joseph Smith, and the process of translating the golden plates?

Richard Bushman 03:39

Well, Joseph Smith was; it's a mystery, I will say that. He was unlearned. He had a little bit of schooling but didn't know Latin or Greek or any other language. Translation was in the air in those times because the Egyptian characters had been found and Champollion was working on them. But he was a genius. Joseph was untrained and not thought of as a genius at all.

Richard Bushman 04:11

But, for some reason, he took on this task of translating the Book of Mormon, and he did it. He said he did it by the gifts of God. He didn't explain how he did it. But he did have an instrument. He called them spectacles, two crystal stones he looked into, and somehow or other the words came to him and he dictated them. And they were written down. And he did this. in the; in total, it was about a period of 15 months, he worked maybe six or eight months on it, dictating day after day, finished in June of 1829, published in March of 1830 as the Book of Mormon.

Jack Dugan 04:58

Even before the Book of Mormon was published, newspapers were reporting on the discovery of the "Golden Bible," and many were critical of Joseph Smith's secretiveness. What was the early reception of the discovery?

Richard Bushman 05:09

The first response, outside of Joseph Smith circle of friends, was that, what they called an "imposition." That is, someone had devised a scheme to deceive people, and probably bilked them of money in some way or other. And Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon was put in a category with the Koran, a religious fanatic, who through the ages, had prevailed upon people's credulity in order to gain power and wealth. And that was what was held over him for many, many years, that he was a charlatan who had just made this thing up.

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Richard Bushman 06:01

On the other hand, closer to him, around his family, they believed it quite readily, and in his circle of friends, who believed without any direct evidence, just he said he had these plates, and they believed it, and they sat down and happily wrote the script as he dictated it to them. It's quite remarkable to me that they did that. At the end, all the while, they couldn't look at the plates, they couldn't see them. At the end, he showed them to 11 men, who had a chance to look at them, and some of them touched the plates.

Richard Bushman 06:39

But that was at the end. Up to that point, all the while he was translating, people believed. It's quite remarkable. And then the plates disappeared. He said he returned them to the angel, so they weren't around to look at. And yet these people were able to embrace the, him as a prophet and to believe in the plates and in the Book of Mormon.

Jack Dugan 07:02

Has anyone tried to find the plates since Smith claims he returned them to the earth?

Richard Bushman 07:06

The plates have intrigued Mormons. And they have taken various steps to attempt to recover them. There were in the 1850s, there were stories told, the cave in the hill Cumorah that Joseph Smith had gone to, to contemplate, maybe to translate. And there was the feeling that, perhaps, when the plates were returned to the angel, they were concealed in that cave. And stories began to circulate that Joseph Smith and a friend of his, Oliver Cowdery, going into that cave, and seeing stacks of plates. The Book of Mormon thus doesn't have one set of plates, but there passages in, that implies there are many more sets of plates, and they were all in that cave.

Richard Bushman 08:05

And I have known people, in fact, one of my own cousins, who hunted for that cave. Now, just as a lark, you know, they're not really taking it seriously. But still, there's enough evidence that you can poke around and they found remnants of what could be a cave. But of course, no plates in them of any kind. But that's about the farthest they have come. There's a lot of scholarship on where the plot of the Book of Mormon went on. Was it in North America, in upstate New York? Is that where all the events recorded there went on? Or was it in Central America? So there are some people who think there were two Cumorahs, one in Central America where Moroni buried the plates, another in New York. And so the speculation, you know, just goes on endlessly. It's just too much fun to think about it.

Jack Dugan 09:07

Can you share with us some of the mythology and some of the critiques around the existence of the plates?

Richard Bushman 09:12

That's a good question, because my whole book is really about mythologies. These plates are so anomalous, so unlike anything else that was known in religious history, that there was always a

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struggle to locate them, how were they to be thought of? And, down to our very own day, people use these plates for their own purposes.

Richard Bushman 09:42

Many of your listeners will know Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which was a Pulitzer Prize-winning play in the 1990s. And it has at this, at its center, a visit of an angel who gives to the, the hero of the play, a man, a gay man named Prior, who's dying of AIDS, a set of plates and an instrument to translate them. So it's a direct borrowing of Joseph Smith. So he borrows that myth, that story, to make his own myth of a man who is suffering and wishes to protest. At the end, having received these plates, he gives them back, refuses the mission, reverse of what Joseph Smith does, and curses God, for his mistreatment, his children. So there's that myth.

Richard Bushman 10:41

There's a myth of James Rollin, who wrote a book about the gold plates being a depository in western American mountains containing the wisdom of Jewish migration from the Old World before the settlement of America. And they deposited these plates with advanced scientific knowledge. But anyone who intervened with those plates would bring about the destruction of the earth. So another kind of story. And there have been stories like that, you know, from the beginning, to sort of give a meaning or to use the powers of the plates for one reason or another.

Richard Bushman 11:28

In terms of criticism, the big problem, of course, is just to discover where Joseph Smith got the idea. And recently, there's been an article by a woman named Sonia Hazard, who is, teaches Religious Studies at Florida State University. And she tried to explain where the idea came from, points out that there was a new printed technology, of stereotype plates, made of metal with characters on them. And she thinks that Joseph Smith could have stumbled upon these in printer shops near his home, and seen them, and been inspired by them. And that, mixed up with all the treasure-seeking lore that he's familiar with, he devised the idea of gold plates.

Richard Bushman 12:20

So that's a scholarly view, very deeply researched work, of how it happened. Others use it in more of a mythological sense, to accomplish purposes of their, their own, like Tony Kushner.

Jack Dugan 12:39

How does the literal belief in the existence of the plates play into the faith of Latter-day Saints? Is it possible for one to be faithful and question their existence?

Richard Bushman 12:48

There is no sort of test of your faith in terms of specific items. So I think there are many Mormons who may sort of hold them in suspension. Maybe they existed, maybe they didn't. But I think most Mormons do. Because it is so built into these founding stories. So if you believe the Book of Mormon, where did the Book of Mormon come from? Well, you can say Joseph Smith made it up.

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Richard Bushman 13:20

That's very hard to believe, that he made, you know, this 24-year-old, 24-year-old kid, with no education can write the Book of Mormon. So the Book of Mormon stands, there's this big rock you have to explain. And there are the plates as a possible source. So Mormons tend to accept the whole package. And it's not debated in, very much. It's just goes along with one of the strange things about a religion, which has many strange things in it, but we love them all. So it's sort of a happy embrace of our, of our crazy parts.

Jack Dugan 14:03

Wonderful, thank you. Why do you believe these plates persist as objects of fascination?

Richard Bushman 14:09

Well, it is quite remarkable that they persist, considering that no one saw them, they're not available. I think, partly, they're intriguing. You know, a set of gold plates, stack of them six inches high, and maybe six by eight in their dimensions, having characters engraved on them, which tell the history of a lost civilization that brought about its own downfall through its wickedness. That as a package is kind of alluring, you know? Once you get a picture of those plates in your mind, it's, it's not gonna go away. And so people picked it up just because it's intriguing.

Richard Bushman 14:56

But I think really why they persist is that Mormons believe in them. It isn't just that there's this image, but you have this whole group of people who say, "We believe they're real, and they did contain an ancient history." And that gives them a kind of a weight, you know, they have to be taken seriously because a million, and many more than that, still believed that they, they were actually an actual object that Joseph Smith possessed.

Jack Dugan 15:28

Of all of the elements of Latter-day Saint history, how did you personally decide to focus on the plates over the last two centuries?

Richard Bushman 15:35

The idea of doing a book on the gold plates just sort of came to me out of the blue. It was around 2010. But it had strike me as interesting because as, as an object, it was so luminous, so fraught with many meanings, and so audacious. I mean, so contrary to our sort of modern mentality, that there should be such a thing as, as plates, and an angel. And I thought it would just be an interesting investigation of how modern people deal with an usual and an unlikely subject, such as the plates. And so I started poking around and to discover that, you know, it's just treated in many, many different ways. So, one thing led to another, and I just kept on writing, and now Oxford is publishing it.

Jack Dugan 16:39

And how does your new book contribute to the scholarship on the Church of Latter-day Saints and its history?

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Richard Bushman 16:46

Well, the book structure is to follow the career of the plates from the time Joseph Smith first announced them down to the very present, down to 2023. And it shows the many guises the plates appeared in, as an imposition, as a marvelous record, as a story that a young man made up; there are innumerable ways that these were used. One was, at one point, there were scriptures in the Bible that were interpreted to mean the Book of Mormon, the gold plates. So they take a passage from Ezekiel and say, "This passage is for seeing the gold plates." So they become an artifact of biblical history, not just the Book of Mormon history.

Richard Bushman 17:44

So they've been used in these many ways. And it was been my intention to lay all those out. So that's the main story. I think part of its, of what I'm trying to do, is to show the continuing fascination with enchantment, with a world that is filled with marvels, and to show that it's very hard to crush that urge to find fabulous things that speak of powers beyond our own and worlds we, we cannot see. And current scholarship is showing how the, the ending of enchantment, which was predicted many years ago, a hundred years ago by Max Weber, simply has not occurred. You cannot crush that desire. And the gold plates of the Book of Mormon are one more example of how enchantment continues to feed us, even down to this modern day.

Jack Dugan 18:53

Thank you very much, Richard. It's been fascinating having you on The Oxford Comment. Yeah, I look forward to your new book.

Richard Bushman 19:00

Okay. Well, it's very pleasant to talk to you.

Jack Dugan 19:05

Our next guest is Grant Hardy, Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, who has produced the first ever fully-annotated, academic edition of the Book of Mormon.

Jack Dugan 19:16

His previous works include *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, as well as *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

Jack Dugan 19:23

Hello, and welcome to The Oxford Comment. We have Grant Hardy here with us who is the author of the first ever annotated edition of the Book of Mormon. Grant, would you like to introduce yourself?

Grant Hardy 19:34

Sure. I am a professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. My area of specialization in history is, is Asian history. So I've, I've written some books and articles about early China and, particularly, about a Chinese historian named Sima Qian. So in addition to that

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part of my professional life, I've also been in persisted in Mormon Studies, in 19th century American religion, and I'm at a university where they encourage faculty to follow their, their interests, and so I've been able to, to do both of those.

Grant Hardy 20:13

So on the Mormon side of things, the Mormon Studies side of things, I edited the *Reader's Edition of the Book of Mormon*, that came out with the University of Illinois in 2003. And then I've also published a monograph on the Book of Mormon called *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, sort of a general literary introduction to the book. And that was in 2010, with Oxford University Press, which is how I got connected with OUP.

Jack Dugan 20:39

So welcome along, Grant. This is the first-ever annotated version of the Book of Mormon. Why do you think a project like this has never been undertaken before?

Grant Hardy 20:47

Generally, this kind of sustained, careful attention to Scripture comes from believers. And Latter-day Saints don't use Study Bibles, they've tended to ignore biblical scholarship for a long time, partly because of our our lay ministry. So our, our leaders of local congregations, up to the people who direct the Church as a whole, have no training in biblical languages, or history, or literary analysis. So what I'm doing, and trying to bring those things to bear on the Book of Mormon, is a fairly new approach.

Grant Hardy 21:23

There have been previous commentaries to the Book of Mormon, sometimes that have gone into multiple volumes. But those are written by Latter-day Saints for Latter-day Saints. And they tend to take a more devotional mode, where they connect the Scripture to the teachings of current Church leaders, or they try to establish historical context for the book somewhere in the Americas, and those endeavors are probably not a lot of interest to many outsiders. So I'm doing, I'm trying to do, offer something new with this edition.

Jack Dugan 21:55

Can you talk to us a little bit about your process in creating this edition? What questions were you hoping to answer? And who did you work with to put it all together?

Grant Hardy 22:04

Well, the basic questions that I wanted to answer are, what exactly is the Book of Mormon? And, what is its message? And how is the book, how does it work? How is it structured? How does the book work as a, as a text? And I guess another question I might try to answer is, is, is why can't Latter-day Saints be more like Jews? At least with regard to scripture study. That's certainly the model for, for many, many generations.

Grant Hardy 22:31

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So my process. I started by reading Study Bibles, and I started with the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, of course. And it really changed the way that I started to interact with the Bible, I really enjoyed it. And from there, I read the Jewish Study Bible. So I'm reading these cover to cover, which is not often the way that people do. These are large books. And then I read Robert Altar's recent three-volume translation of the Hebrew Bible, and, especially, I was reading the Jewish Publication Society's *Etz Hayim, Torah and Commentary*. And as I read those, I started noting the kinds of observations they would make, the kinds of tools that they would offer to readers to help them understand that, and I thought, "I would like to do this for the Book of Mormon."

Grant Hardy 23:15

I grew up as a Latter-day Saint, I'm very familiar with the Book of Mormon, with its stories, with the language, which is a little bit odd. And so I wanted to apply this. So with those questions in mind and ambitions in mind, I started reading the Book of Mormon, as as careful as I could, looking for puzzling phrases, trying to look for broader literary patterns, looking at textual variants. And when I went through that, I also, I also looked up every phrase in the Book of Mormon. So there's a lot, because it's 270,000 words. I looked up every phrase in a searchable electronic version of the Bible, looking for intertextual connections.

Grant Hardy 23:58

And then, of course, I tried to keep up with the increasing number of articles and books from Latter-day Saints about their own Scripture. So with all of that, I put together some sample annotations for First Nephi, which is the the first tenth of the Book of Mormon. And in 2017, I sent those to Oxford, I sent them to Don Kraus, who is the Executive Editor for Bibles at Oxford. He's been doing this for almost 40 years, he's one of the best in the business. And he gave me some suggestions, some criticisms, and then I refined what I was doing. And then I went to work and I wrote annotations for the entire text. So that's about 500 pages, double-spaced.

Grant Hardy 24:43

And then I started rewriting. So I got a lot of feedback from my brilliant wife who reads even more than I do. And she wasn't happy with things. I wasn't happy with things. So we went through five complete drafts of these 500 pages, and then when I was happy with that, I sent it to Don. And he gave me a lot of criticisms and suggestions, some encouragement as well. And so I did a sixth revision of the whole thing. So this has gone, it's been many years and, and lots of effort, but I'm pretty pleased with how things came out.

Grant Hardy 25:18

Usually Study Bibles are the collaborative effort of dozens of scholars, but in this case, because my approach was pretty new, and because there's not a long tradition of Latter-day Saints scholarly consensus on the Book of Mormon that I could summarize and synthesize, I ended up doing it all myself. So, well, we'll see how that goes over. I'm hoping it will start new conversations.

Jack Dugan 25:43

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Well, it sounds like an incredible process. You mentioned there about outsiders to the Church of Latter-day Saints coming to your annotated edition. What do you think your book offers new readers to the Book of Mormon, as opposed to those who are fairly familiar with the text?

Grant Hardy 26:00

Well, if by new readers, you mean people who have looked at the Book of Mormon before, but not done much else other than that, and that, that may be a lot of people, I think the first thing that they'll notice is the reformatted scriptural text. So the official edition of the Book of Mormon, it's done in these little blue covers, missionaries hand them out; there, they're pretty available. But the formatting in the official texts hasn't changed much in the last 100 years. It's still formatted like traditional King James Bibles. So rather than paragraphs, you get individual verses, and there are no poetic formatting stanzas. There are no section headings, there aren't even quotation marks. So I put all of those in.

Grant Hardy 26:43

And those I think, will help readers see at a glance who's speaking, in what contexts, it'll make it much easier to follow the narratives and the arguments, and then to see the constituent parts of the Book of Mormon and how they fit together. I should also say that I, I've taught world religions before, and so I've read a number of annotated editions of other world scriptures coming from Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim or, or Taoist traditions. And those are helpful to remind me of what it's like to be an outsider coming to a sacred text for the first time without a lot of background. And the process was similar for the individual book introductions, and for the general essays. So I should tell people that the Book of Mormon is, is structured a little bit like the Bible, and that there are 15 internal books that are named after different characters or writers. So each of those will have its own little book introduction.

Grant Hardy 27:41

I really like the discipline of writing annotations, because I only get a sentence or two. And then what I say, has to be pretty evident when people look up to the text. And that genre keeps me focused on the text itself, rather than giving me, you know, space for many paragraphs, several paragraphs on my own ideas and interpretations, and, and I think that's what makes these annotated editions or Study Bibles different than a lot of Bible commentaries. So I'm hoping that, that my contributions will be less about me and more about the text itself.

Grant Hardy 28:19

So the first thing you'll notice is the is the reformatted text. And then the annotations of which there are several thousand are brief observations or explanations, that, that try to help readers see the plain meaning of the text, and then go beyond that a little bit to interconnections with the narrative, and with literary features, and, and theological implications. And then the individual book introductions have narrative overviews, and then those are supplemented by observations about the structure and major themes in each book. And then there's a section that's specifically for new readers, like what you might look for the first time you're going through all that.

Grant Hardy 29:04

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And then at the end of the volume, and the, the formatting of this annotated Book of Mormon is very similar to the New Oxford Annotated Bible, at the end of the volume will be a glossary, and an index, but there will also be general essays, there are 12, a dozen general essays. And while the annotations and the book introductions are focused on the text itself, the general essays can introduce readers to conversations about the text. So these are things that people have been saying for a while about where does the text come from, and how was it translated and how is it connected to American history and what's the theology of the book? And so there's, there's introductions at the end to that.

Jack Dugan 29:42

Mark Twain has a very Twain-like, quote, where he refers to the Book of Mormon as "chloroform in print." What in the text do you think he was responding to and how are you hoping to address that critique with this edition?

Grant Hardy 29:55

You know, I understand that this will be done on audio rather than a visual thing. So, so, so are, your listeners are gonna miss your air quotes about "chloroform in print," but I'm afraid--

Jack Dugan 30:05

What a shame.

Grant Hardy 30:07

I'm afraid that that famous, that famous quote is still relevant. Okay? The, the underlying joke there is that one of these internal books is called the Book of Ether. So that's, that's the connection with, with chloroform. But in addition to that, the archaic repetitive language, the complicated narration can, can make the book a bit of a slog to get through. And I haven't, I haven't updated the canonical language, so, so the book will still sound quaint and, and, and a little bit awkward. It's pretty repetitive. It still has all those King James Version's "thees" and "thous," and the, and the grammatical "did go" and "rebeleth" and those sorts of things.

Grant Hardy 30:53

But the reformatting that I've done will add some white space into the text, and it will move the narrative along. It can also be confusing that several major characters have the same name. So I've added subscripted numerals to the names in the, in the section headings so that you can kind of keep all of that straight. So I'm hoping that the experience for modern readers will be better than the one that Mark Twain had.

Grant Hardy 31:22

Actually, I can I can tell you when, when Mark Twain read this book, he first thought in these very dense, long paragraphs, sometimes the paragraphs went on for more than a page. And the reason is, because when the text was dictated, it was dictated without punctuation, without paragraphing. And those were put in by the non-Mormon typesetter for the 1830 edition. And he actually did a pretty good job with the punctuation having, just reading it through the first time. But he really had no idea how the

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narrative was structured. So he put it into paragraphs, but every time he came to that phrase, "it came to pass," he started a new paragraph.

Grant Hardy 32:03

And it's really awkward. When Twain looked at it, he saw it and "it came to pass, it came to pass, it came to pass" sort of all that, it's hard to unsee what you do that. I think Twain said, "Without 'and it came to pass,' the Book of Mormon would have been a pamphlet." So so I think that my modern-style thematic paragraphs are going to make it much easier to, to get through.

Grant Hardy 32:22

In my experience with study Bibles, it can be really helpful to look back and forth between the main text and the, and the annotations. It sort of gives you things to look for, gives you things to notice, helps keep you focused on what's going on. And I would like to replicate that experience for readers of the Book of Mormon.

Grant Hardy 32:40

It's a little bit when I listen to Bach cantatas, and I do so with Alfred Dürr's majestic commentary at hand. That's also published by OUP, it's a huge volume; but it's just, it just gives you so much to listen for and to note, and it really tunes people into the richness of what's, what's going on. Reading the Book of Mormon will still be harder than listening to Bach cantatas, but we'll see how it goes.

Jack Dugan 33:05

You've made the decision with this text to accept large parts of mainstream biblical scholarship, even when it runs contrary to Latter-day Saints interpretations. What motivated you with that decision?

Grant Hardy 33:17

Part of my motivation was that I wanted to bring Latter-day Saints into conversation with mainstream, mainstream scholarship in general, whether that be history or literature or, or religious studies. Latter-day Saints have long been sensitive to outside criticisms, and one response to academic findings or perspectives that challenge traditional interpretations is just to ignore them.

Grant Hardy 33:43

So that might be things like multiple authorship for the Book of Isaiah, or the documentary hypothesis, or historical anachronisms, or the lack of direct archaeological evidence for Israelites in the New World. And I understand that, that impulse, to sort of withdraw into our own bubble, but that's going to cut off conversations that might be useful and helpful, and, frankly, exciting conversations, where Latter-day Saints could learn more about what biblical scholars have discovered in the last 100 years or so. And also, non-Mormon scholars might benefit from being able to take the Book of Mormon a little more seriously, as an example of modern scriptural production, or religious creativity, or a, a revelatory process, however people may define that, or even responses to the Bible.

Grant Hardy 34:37

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So church members often claim that the Book of Mormon is like the Bible. And it is like the Bible in lots of ways, particularly when it's compared with the Deuteronomistic history, which is a term that not a lot of Latter-day Saints will understand. But that's the the narrative historical portions of the Bible from Joshua to Second Kings that have a lot in common with each other, and that are very much connected to Deuteronomy and the perspective in that particular book.

Grant Hardy 35:03

So lots of similarities. But there are also a lot of ways in which the Book of Mormon is not similar to the Bible. And those are significant as well. So, whereas the Bible was written by a number of people over over the course of a thousand years, the Book of Mormon also claims to have been written by numerous people over, over a historical period.

Grant Hardy 35:25

But the Book of Mormon is structured, the way it presents itself, is it's structured as a narrative that's overseen by just three major narrators, that people named Nephi and Mormon and Moroni, which means that the whole Book of Mormon is seen through the lens of these characters. And so it's a more integrated, more coherent volume than the Bible, which is, which is basically a library. The Book of Mormon is sort of like if, if Paul had edited the Gospels and his own letters and put them all together from from one point of view. So I tried to point out differences as well as, as similarities.

Grant Hardy 36:06

And then also, in the annotations, in the essays, I point out the strengths of the Mormon scripture, which I think are considerable, but I don't shy away from noting problems or weaknesses, either. I tried to model a type of sympathetic but honest style of reading. And I tried to read the Book of Mormon in the way, I guess this is this is one of those Golden Rule kind of things, is I try to read the Book of Mormon in ways that I appreciate people from other religious traditions introducing their scriptures to me, so I, it goes both ways.

Jack Dugan 36:45

And how does this new edition contribute to the larger body of scholarship on the Book of Mormon and the Church of Latter-day Saints?

Grant Hardy 36:52

Most of the observations that I make in the annotations are new. And then, the Book of Mormon has rarely been read with the level of attention to detail, including literary features, and intertextuality with the Bible, these are the kinds of things I keep talking about; in general, Latter-day Saints have little idea of how the Book of Mormon actually connects with in response to the Bible, because we don't draw on, on mainstream biblical scholarship in Sunday school, or even in religion classes at Brigham Young University, our, our church university.

Grant Hardy 37:26

So, for example, it's pretty obvious to newcomers to the Book of Mormon that the text is filled with biblical expressions. And you might think that the task of identifying those borrowed phrases would

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have been done long ago, sort of like the New Testament's allusions to the old testament, to the Hebrew Bible, have been catalogued and annotated and commented on for a long time. But it hasn't happened.

Grant Hardy 37:54

Part of the reason it hasn't happened is because the Book of Mormon all the way through, even though much of it, or most of it, is set before the Christian era, it uses New Testament phrases, which Latter-day Saints have been a little bit embarrassed about. But my perspective is, this is what the book is, this is how it's structured. The traditional, you know, the faithful idea of the Book of Mormon is it's a, it's a modern translation of an ancient text. And that seems to be if you take it as a translation, this, this New Testament language is something that's all the way through.

Grant Hardy 38:26

But to get back to my my point, even though it's been there, people haven't really catalogued it. So in this Annotated Book of Mormon that's published by Oxford, this will have the first comprehensive, carefully scrutinized list of biblical quotations and allusions and verbal parallels published, actually ever; there are about 1800 of these entries. So that's one way that I'm hope that this will push the scholarship forward. Also, Latter-day Saints often approach their Scripture as a collection of stories, illustrative stories, didactic stories, and doctrinal statements. So they look for favorite passages, and for proof texts, without often considering the larger context of the narrative or literary developments.

Grant Hardy 39:15

And in this annotated edition, in the book introductions, I take a broader overview, a more comprehensive perspective, trying to show how the story is put together in a larger way. It's something like the Bible Project videos that some people might have seen. That hasn't been done before. And then also the general essays, a few of the general essays take up some topics that haven't been addressed previously. So those include things like how the Book of Mormon compares to other world's scriptures or lived religion in the Book of Mormon. I think I probably take a more comprehensive view of the theology of the Book of Mormon, then, then you would generally find in these contexts, or in earlier publications by Latter-day Saints.

Jack Dugan 39:56

Thank you very much, Grant. That was absolutely fascinating. And I'm really looking forward to the first annotated edition of the Book of Mormon being published. Yes. Thank you for coming on The Oxford Comment.

Grant Hardy 40:08

It's, it's a, it's a pleasure to speak with you, Jack. And I think that the Book of Mormon is a more interesting text than many people assume. And so I'm hoping that this annotated edition will give rise to new conversations and insights, both with outsiders but also with Latter-day Saints themselves. So it's been a privilege to be able to come and talk about this. I'm very excited about finally seeing this project come to fruition, and especially having it published with with with Oxford, that has done so much, for over a century, with Study Bibles.

The Oxford Comment

Episode 86: The Revelation of the Book of Mormon at 200

Jack Dugan 40:37

Thank you very much. We're delighted to be publishing you, too.

Jack Dugan 40:41

We want to once again thank our guests, Richard Lyman Bushman and Grant Hardy, for speaking with us about their scholarship regarding the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Please check out our show notes on the OUPblog for a recommended reading list exploring just a few of the ideas discussed today.

Jack Dugan 40:57

New episodes of The Oxford Comment premiere on the last Tuesday of each month. Be sure to follow Oxford Academic on Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud, and YouTube to stay up to date on upcoming podcast episodes.

Jack Dugan 41:09

While you're at it, please do subscribe to The Oxford Comment wherever you regularly listen to podcasts, including Apple, Google, and Spotify.

Jack Dugan 41:17

Finally, we, of course, want to thank the crew of The Oxford Comment for their assistance on today's episode.

Jack Dugan 41:22

Episode 86 was produced by Steven Filippi and Sarah Butcher. This is Jack Dugan. Thank you for listening.