

LDS Perspectives Podcast

Episode 10: Book of Mormon Scholarship, Theories, and Folklore

(Released November 23, 2016)

Laura Hales: Hello. My name is Laura Harris Hales. Welcome to LDS Perspectives Podcast. I'm here today with Brant Gardner, who earned his master's degree in anthropology, specializing in Mesoamerican ethnohistory from the state university of New York of Albany. Thanks for visiting with us today, Brant.

Brant Gardner: Happy to be here.

Laura Hales: Tell our listeners a little bit about some of the books you've written on Book of Mormon studies.

Brant Gardner: I started kind of where most people would start — at the end. I began with a commentary on the Book of Mormon. The first thing that I published on the Book of Mormon was six volumes worth of more than you wanted to know about the Book of Mormon. Then I've been specializing since then. The other two after that series, the first was a book called *The Gift and the Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, and the second, *Traditions of Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History*.

Laura Hales: As you write a book, it's a research and a learning process. What was one of the biggest surprises you learned as you were writing these books?

Brant Gardner: I think the very first real surprise that I had when I was writing the commentary was that I wasn't able to really look ahead to see where things were going. My mind would kind of range ahead, and I'd say, "Oh yeah, here's what's going to happen in the Book of Mormon, and here's why that makes sense." I found out that every time I did that, I was invariably incorrect, and that if I just went plodding through piece by piece by piece, it actually made sense.

The surprising thing about that is if you think about it, if you're taking a long trip somewhere, and you're just a degree off in the direction you're going that really gets you far off by the end. This process in the Book of Mormon had me dead on the whole way. I was really quite shocked that I

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could begin without the end in mind and have everything match up, if I just carefully plodded through and took it the way it came.

Laura Hales:

That's wonderful. Okay. We're going to talk a little bit about your translation chapter because I think that's what interests people so much, that Joseph Smith had this rock that he used. He put it in a hat and out came the Book of Mormon. You trace this relic that he used, this folk art, back in history to even the Bible, where prophets used something to enable them to translate or to have revelation. Can you give an example of that for us?

Brant Gardner:

Yeah. Part of the question of dealing with the seer stone is to understand why anybody would even think of translating with a rock. Most of us don't think of translating with anything. A dictionary is probably the best that we come up with, but a rock never, never comes up. The question is, why did Joseph think he could do anything?

A lot of that has to do with the folklore about seer stones and what they could do. That goes into the very, very long and worldwide history of something they call scrying, which is being able to see flashes of insight at times when your eyes should not be able to see. What we find is that in the Roman culture, they'd flash the sword and a glint of light would come off the sword, and they'd see that and that would temporarily blind them, and because they were temporarily blinded, they could see things that they couldn't otherwise see.

Then we find in the Bible that there is a particular goblet that Joseph of Egypt uses to see revelation. Typically, what those were were something that would be, let's say a liquid, usually perhaps water, and then there would be something on that that would make things obscured. Maybe a little bit of oil on the water. In the Salem witch trials, the young girls were experimenting with a glass of water that had egg white in it, and the egg white would blur the water, and they would use that to obscure vision, and that would allow them to see when you can't see.

There was this long tradition of using some object to kind of trick your eyes into looking inward, rather than looking outward. That's what Joseph did with the seer stone, and eventually that allows him to tap into the heavenly sight that allows him to see what the heavens would like him to see, rather than the things that we see with our eyes.

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Laura Hales: If we go to D&C 9, where Oliver Cowdery tries to translate in the Book of Mormon, I think it's apparent that there's more involved than the object itself in translating because the Lord says to Oliver, "You thought that it would just happen, but you have to study it out in your mind first."

Brant Gardner: Yeah. One of the things that's interesting about that one, is that when you listen to what Joseph said, Joseph never said anything about figuring it out with his mind. Any description he had, he said, "I did this by the gift and the power, and I would look in, and I would see, and I would read." He never says, "I had to ponder. I had to try to figure it out." You never see him with his scribe, slowing down to say, "Hold on just a second, I've got to ponder this for a second."

I think the real reason that you see a difference there is that Joseph saw things, and the method that Oliver used was a rod, and the rod is a yes/no method of receiving revelation. With a yes/no method, the Lord can say, "Yes, you're right," or, "No, you're wrong." Because of who Oliver was and the way Oliver used the rod to get a yes/no answer, he had to formulate it in his mind and understand what it was and get confirmation. Which, frankly, works really well for the rest of us because we don't get to see visions, and we get to formulate it in our mind and ask questions and say, "Lord, is it right or is it wrong?"

It's a really, really good test that helps us, would've helped Oliver. Might not be the process that Joseph used.

Laura Hales: A while ago, I was able to attend a presentation by Tyler Griffiths, who is in charge of the BYU's new software program that they're developing for BYU students, so they can make an interactive Book of Mormon lands that students can download on their phones and follow as they go through the Book of Mormon, the different locations. They've coordinated those to the text of the Book of Mormon, but in Tyler Griffiths' words, when designing the project, they wanted to make it, so the church could stay out of the geography debate.

The Book of Mormon lands that BYU has designed looks like a stomach. There's an esophagus at the top, I guess a narrow stretch of land, a big stomach, and then a narrow stretch of land at the bottom, which reminds me of the intestines. I don't think I know any members of the church who envision Book of Mormon lands like that.

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Brant Gardner: I have seen that model, by the way, and it really is impressive. I've seen it on a cellphone, it looks very good. They were actually asking me what my opinions were based on what I knew of the geography, and most of the places looked like they had the cities in the right place and the right interrelationships. I had them move something a little bit different here and there, but, "Yeah, it was a really good model." I think it's going to be a great project.

Laura Hales: As you go lecturing, do people usually have in their mind an idea of where the Book of Mormon people lived?

Brant Gardner: I think as human beings, we always have an idea, but sometimes it isn't very well fleshed out. Probably the most normal thing that we think of is: they lived in a place that looks a lot like where we live. They don't really know much about the geography or why the geography would make any difference. When you ask overall, did they know whether it took place in New York or Central America or South America, "No, they really don't." They read the Book of Mormon, and it works quite well for them without knowing that.

However, if we can find places in a real world geography that explain the Book of Mormon, then we can learn things that we otherwise might not learn about the Book of Mormon. That's where the geography gets interesting. It does not prove the Book of Mormon. What it does is it really makes it interesting, because it helps us understand things that we might not have understood before.

Laura Hales: I think that's a good point that you brought up. When I read the Book of Mormon, my people, my characters, because the Book of Mormon does read like a story, are dressed a certain way according to where I think it took place. It kind of humanizes it for me and makes it more real.

Brant Gardner: Yeah. The way you conceive of things frequently has a lot to do with just your own imagination or what you think. If you look at Renaissance pictures of biblical stories, the people of biblical stories are dressed like the people in the Renaissance period. Certainly, they would not have been. There are things that you might learn. In the Book of Mormon, why are Lamanites always attacking, and they're half naked? If it was in a place that was really hot, that might've been a really good idea. If they were in, let's say January in New York, it would've been a horrid idea.

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Sometimes, it really does make the difference of where you are, to be able to picture the people how they're acting, why they're acting. Why are they doing the things they are. I think that's one of the things I find most exciting about the Book of Mormon is that if we can learn more about them as real people, then they get flesh on their bones. We can imagine them wearing things. We actually understand why they did things, other than everything was just a just-so story. They did this, so that we would have a good moral lesson. They usually had some other motive in mind.

Laura Hales: Just briefly, can you tell us how you got involved in studying the Book of Mormon geography?

Brant Gardner: I can do that. I'm not sure how briefly I can do that, but I can certainly do that. I was always fascinated with archeology, and Thomas Stewart Ferguson had written a book called *One Fold, One Shepherd* where he introduced the idea to me at least and probably to another group of people as old as I am, that it might've taken place in Mesoamerica. I went off on my mission, and I thought that this was the best answer. I would tell people about it. I thought it was really great, and I went to Spain on my mission, learned how to speak Spanish, came back, and I said, you know, I'm going to be telling people that this is true, I should do it because I have read the sources, and I can say, "Yes, this is true because I've read it, and it's true."

I did and found out that some of it wasn't as true as what I had been led to believe. I had to learn more to find out what was going on, and just became thoroughly addicted to the subject and couldn't put it down. I came into it kind of backwards, and now I really can't seem to get onto anything else. Every time I think I've finished with everything I could possibly say about the Book of Mormon, it comes and grabs me and says, "Oh, by the way, here's something else you should think about."

Laura Hales: You do believe that the Book of Mormon took place in Mesoamerica, right?

Brant Gardner: Correct. For those who might not know what is meant by Mesoamerica, this is actually a fairly limited area. Mesoamerica is even larger than where we think the Book of Mormon would've taken place. If you would guess, if you're looking at a map, and you're seeing southern Mexico and it looks like a boot, up in the toe of the boot is the Yucatan Peninsula,

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probably not terribly involved in the Book of Mormon, but down in the heel of the boot, that probably was in the area, probably for the land of Nephi, and then heading up towards the ankle of the boot is the land of Zarahemla, in the land north, just a bit north of the boots.

Really a limited, small area where all of this is taking place.

Laura Hales: In your writings, I have noticed that you constantly go back to correlation and convergence as important things to look at when you're trying to determine a location for the Book of Mormon.

Brant Gardner: Yes.

Laura Hales: When you were studying the geography, what kind of correlations did you find, and what kind of correlations did you need to look for?

Brant Gardner: Here's the worst thing that we've done with the Book of Mormon studies, is we've taken two different things that kind of look alike, and we've said, "Oh, they look kind of similar; therefore, they must be related. That isn't a strong enough connection, and it's led us down some wrong paths."

The idea of a convergence is that you want to have more than two pieces. You want to have multiple things that all get put together. You'll begin with the geography and in the geography, you darn well better find a narrow neck and you better find a river. Then you have to find other pieces that fit in. It isn't sufficient just to have a narrow neck, you have to have a river Sidon and a Manti that has a valley to the east of it. Nobody ever seems to remember that. We have Bountiful, we know that it has to be a military protection for the land northward, and it should be on the eastern seaboard. If you can't get it closer enough to the eastern seaboard and the narrow neck, then it doesn't have any military function.

In the geography itself, there are multiple points that all have to get together, and all have to agree before the geography works. Then you can have a geography that could work perfectly and find out that nobody lived there. If nobody lived there, it's still the wrong place, no matter what you can say about the geography. We have several geographies that've been proposed where somebody is able to make the argument that there is a river, and there is a narrow neck of land, and there is this and there is that, but there were no people there at the right time or the people that were there did not have a sufficient culture.

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Once you get a geography, now you have to layer on top of that a people, and the people have to match with what's happening in the Book of Mormon. Very, very simple kind of thing. You have to have Jaredites north of the Nephites. You never get Jaredites down in Nephite lands, and until very, very late in the Book of Mormon, you don't get Nephites into Jaredite lands. You have to find a place where that happened.

So far, I've not found any place other than Mesoamerica where I can make all of those pieces fit.

Laura Hales: When you say convergence, what do you mean by that?

Brant Gardner: I mean where multiple pieces of evidence all converge on the same point. I would have a geographical location that looks pretty good, and then I would be able to say, "Okay, in that area, I have Maya and Zoquete peoples. Were they in the right relationship to each other? Were they there at the correct time?" Then when the answer to that is "yes," then you go in and start looking at their culture or their history, and try to line that up and say, "Do things that we know about who they were and how they acted and when they did things, do those match with the Book of Mormon?"

As a real quick example, we know in the Book of Mormon that Nephi very, very early on, founds a new city, can't have tons of people in this big city because it's brand new, but the people are demanding that he be a king. That's really kind of unusual, especially since Nephi said, "No, I don't want to be a king." They said, "Yeah, you're going to be a king. I want you to be a king." Why would they do that?

We tend not to think about those things, but it just so happens in that area of the world, at that time period, that's when we see the change between chieftain communities and becoming communities that're ruled by kings. It's one of these, "Look, all of our neighbors are got a king, I want a king. Everybody else gets to do it, why can't we?" It's right at that point in time and right at that location in history where those events in the Book of Mormon make perfect sense for exactly what's happening in that time period.

Laura Hales: One of the more fascinating examples out of many fascinating examples that you used in *Traditions of Our Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* is you told the story where Jacob addressed riches and polygamy in the same chapter, and you examined why he would do that.

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Brant Gardner: Yeah. That was really kind of a strange one to look at because you can't see why he would pick those two things. He's really unhappy with the Nephites and he tells them so, he says, "You guys are really doing bad things, and what's really, really bad is polygamy, and, "Oh by the way, you're wearing too fancy of clothing." It just doesn't seem to make sense.

However, in the context of that particular time period, again, when we have early in the Book of Mormon, people who are going from smaller communities to larger ones, this is the time period when in those cultures in that area, they were having people who wanted to do better, and so they wanted to increase trade. You got to have fancy clothing because it came from somewhere else.

Think about that. If you're making your own clothing from things that are around, if somebody else does something, you go, "I think I'll copy that." Nobody can have costly apparel if you can all make exactly the same thing, and in traditional societies, it's not unusual that people who live together tend to make the same clothing.

Costly apparel was something that they got from somewhere else. That's what made it costly. How did they get it? They had to trade. How do you trade? You have to have excess. How do you get excess? You have bigger families. You have polygamy, that gives you more wives who can give you more children who can give you more hands so that you can make more things so that you can go trade. It is a process that has been determined archeologically for that area in that period of time, that this is the kind of thing that was happening. Apparently, that is affecting, just like wanting to have a king affected early Nephites.

These two things affected them, and the reason that Jacob talks about them together is because they were related. Getting the costly apparel required the excess trade goods and the excess trade goods came from polygamist families, so they had more hands to do the work.

Laura Hales: When I was rereading this chapter, I was thinking, this intersects with another criticism of the Book of Mormon. There's this big debate because we haven't been able to find any DNA evidence for Israelites in America. If you look at the text, it really never explicitly says Lehi's family landed on an empty continent. We've just assumed that for many, many years.

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If you look at Jacob chapter three, and chapter two, where it discusses polygamy and riches, they wouldn't be practicing polygamy if there weren't other people there. This is less than fifty years since they've left Jerusalem, it would be incest.

Brant Gardner: Yeah. Not only incest, but just, you don't have enough people. You don't even have enough people for a good headman in a village fifty years after you bring over the thirty people that we might guess were there. Then for someone to assume that because thirty people came over that they must have not only contributed their DNA in ways that were going to be preserved, but that they would contribute all of their culture and all of their language, and we should find this ... This is thirty people in a place where we happen to know that there were thousands. There were millions of people here.

These were more than a drop in the bucket, they were a piece of a drop of a small thing in a really big bucket. It's not surprising that there're a lot of things that weren't there. We do have, by the way, evidence with the Kennewick man of a genetic type where all of the history of that genetic type that we know came into the Americas has totally disappeared. The fact that we say that the Book of Mormon genetic type, if there was one ever, has disappeared, and that's not surprising, is amply proven by the Kennewick man because it shows that that exact process occurred.

Laura Hales: You're talking about Haplotype X?

Brant Gardner: No, this is even prior to that. The Haplotype X is a completely different understanding, and one where you probably need a geneticist to help you out on that one. The only thing I remember reading about it is that it doesn't say anything that we ever thought it said.

Laura Hales: That happens quite often in academia.

Brant Gardner: Quite frequently. And particularly when you're dealing with this kind of a new science that's changing rapidly, and I keep seeing people quoting an article from 1998 talking about Haplotype X, and how that proves things, connections to Israel, and we've done a lot of work since then and all of it turns that upside down. From what I remember, even the person who wrote the article doesn't support it anymore.

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Laura Hales: Now, you don't do your research, so you can prove that the Book of Mormon people lived on this continent?

Brant Gardner: No.

Laura Hales: You do it because why?

Brant Gardner: I'll borrow a comment from Mark Wright here. He said, "I don't do what I do to prove the Book of Mormon, I want to prove it interesting." I'm not going to prove it true, I'm going to prove it interesting. I think that's the real push behind it. I really want to understand who the people were. I want to know why they did things. There're so much that we learn about the people of Galilee, that helps us understand why the New Testament did what it did, and why the people did what they did.

If we understand the history, it just makes it so much a richer experience. That's what I hope to have with the Book of Mormon. I want to enrich that experience by understanding the people and their motivations and all of the reasons that things happened beyond, "Well, they put that there so that I'd have a good story to tell in Sunday School."

Laura Hales: I'm going to share a little snippet from your book. This is not to prove the Book of Mormon as true, but I found it interesting nonetheless.

Brant Gardner: Okay.

Laura Hales: I shared it with my family. If you open up your Book of Mormon, it says that Lehi left Jerusalem 600 years BC, correct, about?

Brant Gardner: Yeah.

Laura Hales: Then you did the math, and you correlated when we think Christ lived and when he didn't. Do the numbers work?

Brant Gardner: That was the strangest thing because the numbers shouldn't work. When you look at it, the Book of Mormon is absolutely clear that Christ was coming 600 years from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem, but Lehi would've left Jerusalem in something like 589 BC, and there aren't 600 years from 589 even if you think Christ was born in year one.

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It doesn't quite work. Except, that people at the time of Lehi used a lunar calendar, and if they had kept the lunar calendar, or accepted the one from the new world that was very, very close to a lunar calendar. If you use and count the lunar years, there are 600 of them. The Book of Mormon counts them down precisely, and if you use the correct adjustment for what a year would have meant to them, it's 600 years. They're not wrong at all.

Laura Hales: That was amazing to me. You're referring to the Mayan calendar, is that correct?

Brant Gardner: Yes. It's more of a pan-Mesoamerican. The Maya were not the only ones who used it. Lots of people in that area had a calendar that trimmed things to 360 days instead of 365.

Laura Hales: For obvious reasons. It's easier to keep track of the moon.

Brant Gardner: Yeah. We have leap years, and they would have things that would keep track of those changes. Those were different calendars. They were quite comfortable having two or three different calendars to count different kinds of things. Again, if you use this calendar that they would've had use and would have been closest to the one that Lehi would have used to make his prophecy, then it counts up quite nicely.

That's another one, if you remember, when we were talking about the vectors and what happens if you're slightly off, I had no idea when I started where the years were going to end up. I did not know whether or not the count was actually precise, or whether they had said, "It's about 600 years." They count down 600 years, and it just so happens that the 600 years work correctly if you use the correct correlation. That was a shock when I found it.

Laura Hales: It was amazing to me, I loved it. There's a prominent Mesoamerican researcher named Michael Coe who said something in the 1970s, and I'm going to paraphrase it, but basically, he said it's really hard to take the Book of Mormon seriously because the members say things that are simply not true. What do you think he was referring to?

Brant Gardner: I think one of the things that he was referring to is that there have been a number of members of the church that will say that the Book of Mormon caused every good thing that ever happened on this continent, that all civilization, the fact that the Maya could write, the fact that they probably

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knew their left hand from their right, all of those things, anything good would've come from the Book of Mormon, and they know that that didn't happen.

Michael Coe is quite correct, that we have been our own worst enemy in the way that we have presented the story of the Book of Mormon, because we have mentioned things that could not have been true. He used that to indicate that the Book of Mormon probably wasn't true, and I think that it's much more likely that it's been our approach that's been wrong, not the book. I think with the right approach, we can get the right information.

Yeah, we can't just dismiss the archeologists and say that because they don't believe in the Book of Mormon, that they must be wrong.

Laura Hales:

I think part of the problem, too, is, we're raised with a certain story because like all disciplines, they advance. They find something and maybe later discard that theory. Every time I'm sitting in Gospel Doctrine class, and they're going to talk about the Tree of Life, I kind of clasp my hands together because I know I'm going to hear about Stela 5. Can you talk about Stela 5?

Brant Gardner:

I probably grit my teeth stronger than you do when that comes up. I have a plaster copy of that that was made by the El Monte California Relief Society, and that is on my wall. It certainly was one of the most famous proofs of the Book of Mormon. The problem is, it really isn't. Both because the location of the city is the wrong kind of place for where the Nephites would've been — too far north. The timing is pretty good, but the real problem is the stone itself. The imagery was interpreted by someone who did not understand that artwork as well as it needs to be.

Then there're other stela in that area that have very, very similar themes on them, and when you compare them to things that are happening on the other stela, you realize that the interpretation that was given about the Book of Mormon is kind of fanciful because it doesn't fit the exact same grouping that's on some of the stelae. There is a Tree of Life, yes, it is not the Tree of Life of the Book of Mormon. It's related to the Tree of Life that was common to Maya cultures. On one of the other stela, you see that the root of the Tree of Life is a big crocodile, which really doesn't fit the story from Nephi very well.

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Laura Hales: I think what you're talking about, we deal with in historiography, if we start out with the thesis, and we go looking for something, we call it quote mining.

Brant Gardner: Yes.

Laura Hales: You can usually find it if you try hard enough, and you're willing to dismiss certain aspects of it, to fit your theory. It seems to me like the Stela 5 fits into that kind of category.

Brant Gardner: Yeah, it really does. It's one where if you take a Mormon interpretation of it and impose that on it, you can see it, and if you don't know any other reason to see something else, you will see what they tell you you're supposed to see in it, and it will look amazing.

Having done that myself, I believe that at one point in time, after I had learned more about Maya art, art from that particular part of the world, learned how to see it in what was happening in it. All of a sudden, it doesn't look the same anymore. There's a famous monument in Kinegua that many, many people say looks like an elephant, and I will get arguments on the internet and they'll say, "See, here is a stela from Kinegua," and it looks like an elephant, and I look at it and say, "No, that's a parrot." They said, "No, you see this, that and the other?" I say, "No, if you look at the way they draw parrots, this is a parrot."

It's one of those kinds of things. I look at it, and I see a parrot quite clearly, and they look at it they say, "Must be an elephant." We're looking at exactly the same thing.

Laura Hales: And they want to find an elephant, don't they?

Brant Gardner: Yes. They would really like to find an elephant, yes.

Laura Hales: Because the Jaredites talk about elephants, so we need to find one, right?

Brant Gardner: That's correct. Is important to find an elephant; therefore, they find an elephant.

Laura Hales: We referenced already the empty continent theory, which I grew up with.

Brant Gardner: As did I.

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Laura Hales: I remember being in fourth grade and being taught about the Asians coming across the Bering Strait and my parents saying, “Oh no, we don’t believe that.” I think that’s probably part of the traditions of our fathers. Your book was really well titled, that maybe we can say, “Okay, we’ve come further now in our studies, we should probably not pass that on any further because it’s damaging to not only ...

Brant Gardner: I’m glad you caught that in the title. It actually was part of the intention.

Laura Hales: Really? It’s not only damaging to someone who might have a faith crisis or something when they realize, “Oh my goodness, there were hundreds of thousands of people for tens of thousands of years before the Lehites came over here.” Also, we know better now. It actually enhances our reading of the Book of Mormon to realize they’re interacting with other cultures, and if we look for those clues in the Book of Mormon, they start popping out.

Brant Gardner: Yes.

Laura Hales: Where we never saw them before. I’m going to tell you another one. I know this is, I’m going to mispronounce it.

Brant Gardner: Okay.

Laura Hales: It’s how I learned it in elementary school. Quetzalcoatl. That’s your trigger word.

Brant Gardner: That’s the word, yes. That’s probably the way I got into most of what I do in both Mesoamerica and for the Book of Mormon, the Aztec pronunciation is Quetzalcoatl, and I think my children are about the only ones that ever learned how to do it that way. They knew I was going to make them learn.

But, I got fascinated with this because I was told that Quetzalcoatl was Jesus Christ, and, of course, I thought I should really be able to again read the Spanish sources, so I could go back and say, “Yes, this is true, because I read it.” Then I read it and I said, but wait a minute, that’s not true, and I read somebody’s dissertation about why it was, and I said, “Yeah, but all of the evidence you showed basically says, ‘No,’ and then you say, ‘Yes.’” I spent a long time working on the subject, a lot of it completely unrelated to the Book of Mormon, because I just got fascinated and was trying to figure out where this figure came from, and where the mythology went.

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One of the most important discoveries was that virtually everything that makes Quetzalcoatl appear to look like Christ was invented after the conquest, and I cannot trace it to any time prior to when the Spanish show up. There are very few documents that talk about Quetzalcoatl prior to the time the Spanish arrive, but in those documents, he's qualitatively a different type of being than the Spanish fathers made him out to be.

Then it was some Spanish fathers, because you only get the benevolent Quetzalcoatl when you have the Spanish fathers who are trying to be nice to the Indians. Those who hate the Indians or otherwise wished to enslave them really want to have the more cruel and more foreign Quetzalcoatl. They'll talk about the statue of Quetzalcoatl, which was always painted black, which is kind of a contradiction to our idea that he was a white God.

Laura Hales: You know, if you unpack the whole idea of him being Christ, it has problems in the text, because Christ appeared in the Americas after his death and talked about a second coming. We know by the end of the Book of Mormon, all the Nephites, which had become a religious term rather than an ethnic term, died out. This idea that that part of the religion would've survived is a bit incredulous, don't you think?

Brant Gardner: Oh, I think it's to the point where it simply could not have happened. You're not going to take a belief that was absolutely sacred to the Nephites that they would've held sacred and not wanted to be ridiculed, and then when they died out, the only place that it would show up is somebody who had a fond memory of it and kept it in their folklore. No, the people who killed the Nephites would have had a good reason to want to get rid of Nephite religion. It should not have been a memory in folklore and does not behave that way in the text that we see.

Also, the idea that he was a great white God. If he came from Jerusalem, he probably would have looked somewhat like they did.

Laura Hales: Yeah.

Brant Gardner: Which is olive skinned.

Brant Gardner: Yeah. Nobody ever talks about the olive God. The brown one. Yeah, and the thing about the white God that was more fascinating when I was looking at it, is that this concept that it might've been related to skin color,

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and that it was so unusual for the natives. Apparently it wasn't. The only time I found mention of the Native Americans talking about Spanish skin color, which is much more olive, Mediterranean, is that they are whiter than we are. They would not have considered themselves not white. They just considered the Spaniards whiter than we are.

Laura Hales: Good point. Okay, I'm going to put you on the spot.

Brant Gardner: Okay.

Laura Hales: To conclude this interview. In five sentence or less.

Brant Gardner: I'm not even sure I'm capable of five sentences or less.

Laura Hales: Most aren't. Usually end up five paragraphs or less.

Brant Gardner: Right.

Laura Hales: Can you sum up how you think looking at the Book of Mormon as history will enhance our study of the book, which we generally see as the devotional book?

Brant Gardner: I think by understanding the devotion of real people and the motivations of real people, we can better understand how to apply that text to our own lives. Even though our circumstances might be different, if we understand them as just as real and just as much flesh and blood as we are, now we have a relationship to them that is closer, and it's tighter, and the solutions that they come up with for spiritual benefit are just closer to things that we understand and things that can help us better because we feel for them and with them.

Laura Hales: Thanks, Brant, for visiting with me today.

Brant Gardner: You are welcome. It's been fun.

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