

LDS Perspectives Podcast

Episode 47: Recreating the Book of Mormon World with Taylor Halverson and Tyler Griffin

(Released August 2, 2017)

Nick Galieti: Hello, welcome to this episode of the LDS Perspectives podcast. My name is Nick Galieti, and I'll be hosting this episode. Our guests are Taylor Halverson and Tyler Griffin. Taylor Halverson is a BYU teaching and learning consultant, he's also a member of the Book of Mormon Central Executive Committee, and co-founder and co-director of the BYU Virtual Scriptures Group.

Tyler Griffin is an associate professor of ancient scripture at BYU. He is a co-founder and co-director of the BYU Virtual Scriptures Group. His research interests include finding ways to make the scriptures more relevant and meaningful for students using technology to deepen learning and improve teacher training. Welcome you two. Thank you very much for coming in and talking to us.

Both of you are not only active in Book of Mormon research but also in the distribution of that research. Taylor, you're with Book of Mormon Central; you both are working on this virtual scripture's group. Starting with Taylor, what are some of the challenges that you're facing with distributing scholarship to an LDS mass audience about the Book of Mormon?

Taylor Halverson: The first is probably awareness. If we're talking about Book of Mormon Central, we are a young organization, just barely over a year old officially. Mostly it's a challenge of raising awareness of what is available. There is an ongoing opportunity for figuring out how do you shape updated explanations about existing scholarship. Most people aren't going to want to read a long book or piles of scholarship, but they're happy to get a nice, engaging summary of a couple of pages.

At Book of Mormon Central, we spend quite a bit of time thinking about some of the driving questions that are interesting to people and how we can communicate that in a compelling way that actually matters to their lives today — not just, “here's something that is intellectually interesting,” but, “here's something that matters to your personal life.”

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Nick Galieti: What about you, Tyler?

Tyler Griffin: I think in a similar vein to this, just awareness for our students. What I found is that there is so information out there; this is the other extreme. There's so many resources and so many things that you can turn to to find answers that they often struggle with information overload and so consequently —

Nick Galieti: It's just too much.

Tyler Griffin: It's too much; it's overwhelming; it's a flood. What Taylor and I are trying to do with others at BYU is, this is the same model with Book of Mormon Central that he described, which is take the stuff that's going to be the most beneficial, that will help bring the scriptures to life in a way that is historically accurate, that's as true as we can be to the text, but also that is this relevant, meaningful and applicable to the modern reader, and put those tools in the hands of the students so that they can feel more confidence when they open up the scriptures.

They don't need to feel so dumb or so confused. They can say, "Okay, I get this. I can visualize this. I can picture this." Just make it accessible.

Nick Galieti: And relevant.

Tyler Griffin: And relevant.

Nick Galieti: Keeping Book of Mormon research relevant is its own subject, but there's also kind of a subheading to that, that is not just the doctrines, the teachings. The scholarship regarding Book of Mormon geography is kind of this subsection, if you will, of studying the Book of Mormon. Why don't you tell us about what you're doing with this group and something that we might be able to consume public that's out right now?

Tyler Griffin: Perfect. The beginning part of this, five years ago, six years ago, when I first came to BYU, you come to certain sections in the Book of Mormon, and I'm always looking for what are the pain points? What are the areas that students zone out, give up, skip, and disregard. What are those areas? It turns out, they're pretty predictable. You've got the Isaiah chapters, you've got long sections about the House of Israel, the scattering, the gathering, which largely are in Second Nephi, and stuff like that.

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That's a totally different project, but the other place that we noticed that students zone out a lot is when it starts getting very specific in movements of people. For some people, it's the war chapters. Others it's these multiple migrations in the Book of Omni. Then, the follow up Words of Mormon, throughout the Book of Mosiah you've got the different groups going different places at different times, and the flashbacks. Students become so confused, this rising generation. They don't like feeling stupid, and they don't like feeling ignorant.

Nick Galieti: That's pretty universal.

Tyler Griffin: It is. But because of the information age, and the information at their fingertips so much, and the fact that they're reading this book written in King James English, it's very frustrating when they get so wrapped around, "Wait a minute, who's who? Where's where? When did this happen? Why are we now going back in time?" Consequently, they will disengage from their serious study of the Book of Mormon. If they have to, for points, they'll let their eyes scan over the black words on the white page to just say, "Yeah, I read this chapters." But they didn't really engage those chapters.

What the Virtual Scriptures Group at BYU is trying to do is say, "Let reduce those pain points for them. There's no royal road to learning. We can't do this for them, but we can make their road to learning a little less bumpy, a little more exciting, and a little more real and relevant." What we've tried to do is to say, "Let us go to the hard work of digging out these geographical references in the Book of Mormon and try to make sense of them in an internal, relative map that is interactive, so they can see spacial reference points and say, "Oh, okay, this is a three-day journey by Alma. Northward from here.""

All of a sudden, you'll find that when you throw the map up on the screen, when going through the war chapters or going through the Book of Mosiah, or through certain passages in Helaman, all of a sudden, the students love it, they're engaged, they're in their scriptures. We're not trying to get the students out of the scriptures, we're trying to actually get them deeper into the scriptures with these external resources.

The interactive map, or Mormon's cave with the plates, the various source materials that Mormon used to tie into the Book of Omni in the Words of Mormon, and throughout. All of those resources. All they're doing is

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helping to remove the confusion, to increase confidence in the students, to give them a frame a reference so that when they go into the text, now they don't disengage, but they don't hyper focus on the geography. It becomes, what I think Mormon intended it to be, which is this beautiful overlay — the supplement to then help them focus on the teachings and doctrines of the Book of Mormon and help bring souls to Christ. Basically help them focus on what really matters most in the book.

Nick Galieti: Yeah. In the past we've had certain maps; we've had paintings that people have made to try and make these things more real. You're talking about taking a tablet.

Tyler Griffin: That's correct.

Nick Galieti: You have an app that makes it, where you literally can almost fly through —

Tyler Griffin: That's right.

Nick Galieti: Some of these scenes.

Tyler Griffin: The rising generation, they don't like being told what to do as much as previous generations. They don't like a talking head. They prefer to get the video game console into their hand, so to speak. They want an experience, and they want to go exploring. They want to figure out. That's basically what we're doing, is giving them the controls to say, "Here's the Book of Mormon. You can pick whatever chapter you want: go explore, fly through the interactive map, look at these things, try to make sense of them."

Nick Galieti: As you do say, there's so much content that Mormon and Moroni had in the Book of Mormon that speak to geographic locations. It's not an overstatement to say that it matters, the Book of Mormon Geography matters. It's clearly in there for a reason. However, there is a lot of confusion that people have. There is a very wide spectrum of interest in Book of Mormon Geography. What is and what isn't important about Book of Mormon Geography in general?

Tyler Griffin: I think the issue here is it's a swinging of a pendulum. For some people, they get so excited about the geography in the Book of Mormon, and trying to nail it down to a specific location on the map today, which is

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interesting because the church has a very official stance. We don't put a pin in the map as a church, and at BYU, we don't put an X on the map and say, "Here's Helaman, here's Bountiful, and here's Nephi."

It's a totally neutral position to say, "The Lord hasn't revealed this yet." He could've made it very easy, but he didn't. Some people, we feel, swing the pendulum so far to the side of, "I'm going to figure out where this took place on the external map." It's almost as if every time they open the Book of Mormon to read it or to study it, they're looking for validation or verification or proof for their external geographical model wherever it may be. They're all over the map, all over the world, in fact.

Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Africa, Central America, South America, Baja, the heartland of America, North America in general — meaning it's all over the place. We're not opposed to people getting excited about that kind of thing. That's just not what we're interested in because we found that sometimes it's easy, no, not everybody's done this, but it's easy to swing that pendulum so far that all you see in the Book of Mormon is proof for your external model, which we feel, takes away from the message of the book stated on the title page.

The other extreme end of that pendulum would be to say, "I just don't care at all about geography, and I'm going to totally skip every time anything gets mentioned. I'm going to zone out if it starts talking about migrations, movements, war campaigns, and all of that. I just don't care." That extreme will lead people to opening the book and now missing out on a great deal of the principles and the doctrines that are contained within those narratives that are semi-reliant on the geography that Mormon or Moroni mention within that part of the story.

We're trying to avoid both of those extremes and say, "Let's remove some of the cognitive load associated with making sense of this." Because it is complicated. These stories are scattered throughout 531 pages. It takes a lot of effort and a lot of work. We're on map version 39 right now. It's a lot of hours. We're trying to do that so people don't have to go through that effort to say, "Here are the relative distances, now focus on the doctrine."

Nick Galieti:

Yeah. It is one of the things that I think I've encountered. Before coming and doing this interview, I talked to my wife and said, "What questions would you have about Book of Mormon Geography?" And her response

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was kind of a shoulder shrug of, “I don’t know.” I don’t know that people have much of a starting point, which might be part of the apathy. What’s a good starting point for someone who need to even get to that hump of caring about Book of Mormon Geography?

Tyler Griffin: Let me use an analogy. It would be like reading an epic novel, along the lines of say a C. S. Lewis *Chronicles of Narnia* or Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. If you read those kinds of books, those kinds of stories, without some sort of a map, some sort of a reference point, then you miss out on a great deal of the story that’s going along because the author, the person who’s telling you the story, he has that map in his hand. It’s important to him as he’s showing you movements and interactions between different locations. It’s important to him.

I would say, a starting point would be let the Book of Mormon speak for itself. Let’s not superimpose anything externally onto the book. Let’s just let the book be itself. For starters, it would be, as you read through the book, just have this map off to the side and just glance. When he mentions a location, just glance and locate on the map. Then keep reading the story. Don’t overemphasize it, don’t over focus on it, and just keep reading. Next time it mentions a location, glance.

After doing that a few times, a person will realize that, maybe for them, they really don’t need the map. Maybe the visual-spacial stuff isn’t working for them at all. That’s totally okay. But most people will find that the map enhances their study and enhances their engagement level with the text and their excitement to read on, because it becomes more real. These are real people, this is not a Tolkien *Lord of the Rings* or a *Chronicles of Narnia* allegory. These are real people, in a real location, with real struggles and real lives. Then, it becomes more relatable to our life when we can see the hand of God in their lives in a real location.

Taylor Halverson: We should point out that the internal map that we’ve developed at BYU with the Virtual Scriptures Group is freely available. It’s at the website bom.byu.edu. Again that’s bom.byu.edu. Anyone can go freely download it and do the various things Tyler is talking about. Have it open while they’re reading the scriptures. If they find it useful, we’ve achieved our objective. If not, we’d be happy to get feedback on how to make it better.

Tyler Griffin: That’s the neat thing about what we’re doing is. This is not carved in stone; it’s dynamic. If somebody finds something in their reading that

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says, “Oh, my goodness, this location can’t be there where they’ve got on the map.” Give us feedback, we can make version 40.

Nick Galieti: And probably will, right?

Tyler Griffin: And probably will.

Taylor Halverson: Yeah.

Nick Galieti: When talking about Book of Mormon Geography again, we’re dealing with a really broad set of people coming from different perspectives on what’s relevant, what’s not relevant, and those sorts of things. I came across a quote in the introduction to Thomas Stuart Ferguson’s book *Cumora Where?* “There’s a fear in doing Book of Mormon Geography, a research of this type where you would take a consistent book and make it appear to be inconsistent with itself.”

He also says that sometimes we can add to this cloud of confusion that people might have. Did you guys go into this project worried at all about adding to the confusion?

Taylor Halverson: No, we actually thought that we’d provide a lot of clarity because Tyler and I can sit over lunch and be really excited about external geography maps. We actually really like geography and interested in the different evidences. Even today, we care more about people’s engagement with the gospel, as found in the pages of the Book of Mormon, and how an internal map can solidify that. We believe that our approach will help avoid confusion. Because when people spend too much time trying to promote any particular geographical theory, they may miss the purpose of the Book of Mormon. That’s where the confusion sets in, I believe.

Nick Galieti: What are some specific places in the Book of Mormon, or I guess the geography of the Book of Mormon, where you have found this internal map to be most helpful.

Tyler Griffin: The simple answer would be your major movements that involve either migrations, missionary journeys, or war campaigns. For instance, the book of Omni, where you get the people of King Mosiah the First leaving the land of Nephi and going down, which is north to the land of Zarahemla, and running across the people of Mulek, and setting up Zarahemla. That’s significant for people to see. That’s the first major place.

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Nephi didn't care much about geography, and he told us that. He says, "I'm not going to write anything about the external stuff. I'm just talking about the things of my soul." We get very little geography in First and Second Nephi. It really starts to pick up in Omni, then mostly with Mormon. The book of Mosiah starts with King Benjamin. Next thing you know, you've got this flashback to about 200 BC with Zeniff taking the group back up to the land of Nephi. The whole central part of the book of Mosiah is Zeniff, then Noah, then, Limhi, then Alma breaking off and the different groups getting out of and going back to Zarahemla. That can be so confusing for students, but in our app, you have the map, you have the chapters, you have the dates, and you have the major people.

It's all triangulated. As they walk through, they can see what's happening with the timeline, what's happening on the map, where it took place, who's involved, and what the major events were. All of a sudden, they say, "Oh, okay, this is a flashback." Or, again, in the book of Alma, it's probably the most helpful, because you've got all the missionary journeys of Alma in the beginning part, then Alma, Amulek, and others in the middle part. In the war chapters, it really shines because people can visualize the different campaigns as they're mentioned by Mormon, who is a military leader, quoting Captain Moroni, the military leader ... Geography is a big deal to a war captain.

Taylor Halverson: You don't get to be a very successful war captain if you cannot master the geography. Geography will make or break. It's interesting. This project gave me some new insights I had never seen before. We have the missionary journeys of Alma and his brother in going —

The way this got mapped out, as Tyler was demonstrating on the map, is notice that the Zoramites in this peripheral land in-between the Nephites and the Lamanites, they're over on the eastern flanks.

Tyler Griffin: Southeast corner.

Taylor Halverson: The southeast corner. If the Zoramites politically joined with the Lamanites, the Nephites are now exposed to military invasion. It's very interesting as you look at where Alma's going and spending time. It's not just a spiritual move on his part to go preach the Zoramites. He's trying to protect the physical safety of his people on the Nephite homeland from the potential of the Zoramites turncoat into the Lamanites. If you don't have physical safety, spiritual safety can be very difficult.

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Alma is this brilliant tactician, from a military standpoint. It's really fun to see that on the map. I'd read all about the stuff, suddenly there's this new insight about potentially why Alma is choosing that particular mission.

Nick Galieti: There's a very pragmatic aspect of this that once these people become more tridimensional, once we see that there was movement in the proximity to these things, we can have a better understanding of what motivated them. Maybe, why they said some of the things they said, for that matter, why Mormon and Moroni put that stuff in there.

Tyler Griffin: Absolutely. I will just say, tacking onto that, that an interesting side note here for somebody who may be listening thinking, "Yeah, this is all fine and good, but I, really, at the end of the day, what difference does any of this make?" For some people, there's a bigger perspective here that you've got. Roughly, depending on how you measure, you've got over 550 references to geography in the book, and it's scattered through multiple stories over 531 pages.

There's this overarching thread that says, "There are people out there who claim that Joseph Smith just made up the book." If that claim is true, then Joseph Smith was an absolute genius. Because the geography references are consistent across all these stories, across all this time. According to the witnesses of the translation process, none of them have any reference to Joseph having charts, maps, books, reference materials. He's just going.

This guy is either translating this book by the gift and power of God, or he's an absolute genius the likes of which I've never come across.

Nick Galieti: I've heard one person say something to the effect that, "If Joseph had made the book up, he would've known where it took place, he would've said it, he would've said, 'oh, it took place here.'" But he never did, right? He made stabs at, he guessed, he was researching geography himself. There's a model for research right there, that Joseph Smith himself was interested in where the book he translated took place. That's pretty incredible.

Tyler Griffin: It's interesting because, then, the question goes beyond geography to other things like if Joseph is making this up, that's really, really peculiar that in 531 pages, Joseph wouldn't have included anything that speaks of the Native American culture that Joseph Smith would've been familiar with in upstate New York in the early 19th century. There are no teepees in the

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book, there are no moccasins, there are no powwows, there are no rendezvous, there are no trading posts, there's no howl, there's nothing —

Nick Galieti: War bonnets.

Tyler Griffin: War bonnets, feathers. There's none of these.

Taylor Halverson: The League of Five nations.

Tyler Griffin: The stuff that would just scream if you were Joseph Smith saying, "I need to make a book about the Native American ancestors. Boy, our 23-year-old farm boy did a great job of keeping out everything that's associated with Native Americans as he would've known it out of his book. Even other things like he was Joseph Smith Junior, his father was Joseph Smith, and the Book of Mormon is loaded with father-son couplets having the same name and not a single time do we get a "junior," not once in the entire Book of Mormon. He never uses the word "junior."

Nick Galieti: Alma the Younger, Alma the Elder.

Taylor Halverson: Yeah.

Nick Galieti: How come it's not Alma Senior and Alma Junior?

Taylor Halverson: If that's Joseph Smith writing it. That's a great insight.

Nick Galieti: As you've talked with your students over the years, have you seen anything change over time with respect to students interest or maybe demand for some knowledge regarding geography?

Taylor Halverson: It's interesting in how in the '50s and '60s, at the New World Archeological Foundation, there was more of an interest in Book of Mormon Geography, openly and officially. In fact, we have a BYU President, was it Brimhall back, about 100 years ago, led a group of 30 people down to Mexico to try to find Zarahemla. I think what's happened over time is that those efforts, which are really pretty amazing from a scholarly standpoint, this is pushing forward knowledge and understanding that I think the church leaders came to realize that it was a bit of a distraction from the core element of the Book of Mormon, to the point that you don't really have a lot of scholars who make it their career to do Book of Mormon geography.

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I could tell you a handful of scholars that are involved in Book of Mormon geography, but it's almost like a side project for them, whereas 50, 60, 70 years ago, you had people who what they were curious about is, "I'm going to find the right answers to Book of Mormon geography. The external models again. I think there's so much that we don't know. It's just a very big question; it's a big research project. I don't expect us to have clarity on it anytime soon. I'm okay with that. It's a fun scientific enterprise to be engaged in, but I don't see that there's a big demand among students clambering for some kind of clarity around where it happened.

Sure, people ask the questions, but I don't see a demand of, "Well, if you can't show me where it happens, I'm just done, I refuse to even open the book." I just haven't seen that.

Tyler Griffin:

That's one of the beauties of an internal map like this. Say you may feel really strongly about one particular external model over another one. That's fine. You can take this internal map, you can squeeze, you can twist, you can contort, you can adjust, but relatively speaking, these are the six cities that have to be on the eastern sea coast. That's what he said, he's very clear about that, "these are the ones that are on the west, there's a narrow strip of wilderness," and these kinds of things. They have to wrestle with that.

But the major change that I've seen over these years is because of the students. It seems to have driven the scholarship. These students are much more interested in hands-on experience and visual-spacial experiences. Because this is the digital video game generation. They're digital natives.

Our generation, we didn't have as much of a problem sitting down with a book and reading black words on a white page and really wrestling with it, connecting with it. Students today, they still do that, but not to the same degree that previous generations did. For us, it's the 2 Nephi 31:3 principle, where Nephi said, "For my soul delighteth in plainness, for after this manner doth the Lord God work among the children of men. For the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding. For he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding."

The rising generation, their language and understanding is slightly modified from ours. Instead of being upset about that, or complaining about it, or force feeding them into our language and understanding, what

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we're trying to do is say, "let's put some things into your hand that will speak to you, that you'll understand, so that you can now, with excitement, go into those black words on the white page."

Nick Galieti: As far as your work moving forward in this. I know that you guys have an app that is for Jerusalem, New Testament kind of centric. You are doing this map or have done this map for the Book of Mormon. What other maps are you guys working on? What other geography-based things are you using?

Taylor Halverson: There's a lot to be done with both of those. Our grand vision, if you talk about the Bible for a minute is, we would love to raise funds to rebuild the Mediterranean Ancient Middle East virtually. That you can go, insert yourself into any location at any time period, and go experience the past and see how it connects to the scriptures.

I'm guessing we'll probably be dead before that happens. Although if we could pull it off before we're dead, that'd be really a lot of fun.

Tyler Griffin: That'd be great.

Taylor Halverson: We just recently signed a license agreement with the church to help release a product we'd helped them to build over five years — the 3D Interactive Jerusalem Project. Right now it's just Jerusalem, but we have plans to expand to Bethlehem, down to Jericho, and all the way to Galilee, Rome, and Ephesus. We actually have quite a big plan, but it also just takes a lot of time and resources.

Nick Galieti: This is different than a movie, right? Because you're completely immersed in it, you're talking about recreating history, which means that there has to be some interpretation on those things. How do you mitigate the challenges and risks of putting forward your version of whatever geography it is and not have it come across as too interpretative?

Taylor Halverson: Interpretation will happen no matter what. Without a guide, people will invent in their own brains what they think it is. I grew up in the church, went to seminary, had all sorts of ideas about what the Bible was like, what the Holy Land was like. I spend a semester there at the BYU Jerusalem Center. I can't think of an idea I had about the Bible that I was able to retain visually.

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Nick Galieti: That's significant.

Taylor Halverson: Because I didn't know. I was a kid growing up in Minnesota. As if there's any connection between Minnesota and the Holy Land. Sure, there's interpretation, but I would rather give people an informed interpretation. Is it perfect? No. Versus just their own random —

Tyler Griffin: Yeah. We're not completely without resource there. The archeological field is pretty good in the Holy Land especially. There are some really key notes and side data that we can use to try to make the buildings, the types of construction materials, the look and the feel of decoration kinds of things. There's a lot of information both archeologically and then also historical documents.

You've got Josephus, you've got all of the Messianic writings, letters and things from antiquity to draw upon, to help us so that we're not forcing a 21st century interpretation back onto the 1st century, but to try as much as possible to let those people tell their own story. Again, like Taylor said, you're never going to get perfect, because even a journal entry can have errors in it.

Nick Galieti: To sum up, why don't you guys give us, again, some websites that we can go to to find your data?

Tyler Griffin: You've got virtuascriptures.byu.edu is kind of the overarching site. If you want New Testament specific apps, tools, resources you would go to nt.byu.edu for New Testament, byu.edu. Taylor already gave you the Book of Mormon site: bom.byu.edu. If you go to the App Store, you can download the 3D Jerusalem app onto an iPhone or an iPad. If you search for the app called Virtual New Testament, you'll find it, and it's free.

Taylor Halverson: I'll throw in another product out there that I created with Stephen Liddle, information systems professor at BYU, that's also free and what we've done is we have tagged every geographical reference in the Old or New Testament to Google Maps. You can read with a scripture pane on the left-hand side and the Google Map and on the right-hand side with red dots with all the places mapped out.

Nick Galieti: How do people find that?

Taylor Halverson: Go to scriptures.byu.edu/mapscrip, No "t" at the end of that.

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Nick Galieti: Okay.

Taylor Halverson: Scriptures.byu.edu/mapscrip. It's free, and it's a lot of fun. You can go read Isaiah, chapter by chapter, and see all the places that got cursed. If you're into that mode. It's Halloween, you want to see where all the curses happen in Isaiah, how about it?

Tyler Griffin: Gather around kids, family scripture time.

Nick Galieti: See where people got cursed? Fantastic. That's a lot of links. What we'll do is we will take that, and we'll put all the links with the entry for this episode at ldsperspectives.com. We encourage, of course, people to take a look at those things and to download those apps.

Any parting words, if you could, if you were to talk to that person out there that is in that category of: "I just don't know that I care about Book of Mormon geography." What's a 30-second elevator pitch to start caring?

Taylor Halverson: We would invite them to open up the scriptures and try out some of these tools we've created, give it a shot, and see what happens when you experience the scriptures in a new way.

Tyler Griffin: We're saying if you don't change anything, nothing is going to change. If we believe in a "line upon line, precept upon precept," then many great and important things pertaining to the kingdom, not just to the kingdom, but to us individually, we'd say "give it a shot."

Taylor Halverson: This could be the next line.

Tyler Griffin: This could be that next precept for that next line to take your scripture study to a deeper level of appreciation and gratitude and finding more principles than you've found before.

Nick Galieti: Again, Taylor Halverson and Tyler Griffin are co-directors of the BYU Virtual Scriptures Group. We want to encourage you guys to go check out those links and thank you both for coming in and talking about it.

Tyler Griffin: Thanks for having us.

Taylor Halverson: Thanks, Nick.

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