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Paul C. Gutjahr, *The "Book of Mormon": A Biography*

Reviewed by Kathryn Lofton

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Down these three avenues of scholarly reflection and numerous others, David Holland's erudite and intriguing study of debates about canon and continuing revelation invites further research and writing on an important but frequently overlooked topic.

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The Book of Mormon is a book I have begun many times only to put it aside before I even reach the book of Jacob. The edition I possess was given to me by Chicago missionaries in 1997, and my incomplete reading of it haunts me. When I picked up Paul Gutjahr’s *The “Book of Mormon”: A Biography*, I thought perhaps this would be the commentary that would inspire my return to the Book of Mormon, a return that would give me another chance to see what it is about this text that makes it a scripture for so many. And also another chance for me to see if the missionaries were right: that it could be scripture for me.

Gutjahr presents a history of the Book of Mormon in which the reader is unspecified: she could be someone for whom this is a sacred text, and she could also be someone for whom it is a farce. Gutjahr chooses as his epigraph a statement from that most repossessed Mormon, Orson Pratt: “This book must be either true or false. If true, it is one of
the most important messages ever sent from God to man. . . . If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked, bold, deep-laid impositions ever palmed upon the world, calculated to deceive and ruin millions who will sincerely receive it as the word of God.” This is a sharp framing for a biography of the Book of Mormon, since questioning whether Joseph Smith’s revelation supplied scripture or a humbug has been a central practice of American religious life since its antebellum appearance. John Gilbert, who set the type for its original printing in Palmyra, New York, in 1829–30, was clearly decided on the point, describing the Book of Mormon as “a very big humbug” (p. 38).

As David Walker has recently argued, humbug was a productive term for religious life in the nineteenth century, encapsulating “an elaborate theory of social interest and intellection, one that assumed that a public good was provided by constructing spaces of debate and consideration.” Walker explains that during the nineteenth century, to call something a “humbug” was not simply to tag it with an epithet, but to prompt a ritual investigation into the substance of the accused subject. In the second chapter of this biography (“Holy Writ or Humbug?”), Paul Gutjahr offers a wonderful description of the lines of argumentation used to explain or debunk the Book of Mormon. This chapter would be ideal to excerpt and should be inserted into courses on Mormonism, American religious history, or theories of religion, as it would establish the provocative terms for a debate among students about how to interpret claims of mystical origin.

This chapter indicates how Gutjahr’s book is a model text for the current hermeneutic epoch, one in which scholars of religion focus on the world made by and through a text, its communities, and its critics. Written with lucidity and careful research, Gutjahr’s biography evades any adjudication of humbug for the book, instead situating it within the “spiritually vibrant culture” of the early national period in which “every individual

could experience an unmediated and personal relationship with an omni-
nipotent God” (p. 14). Gutjahr implies that the Book of Mormon was one especially intense product of a compulsively revelatory culture. He suggests, further, that even if it isn’t your kind of revelation, even if you suspect Smith of trickery, you can learn something about nineteenth-century American culture by reading the Book of Mormon. Who cares from whence it came? It exists as a document of its culture and can be read beneficially as such.

Yet the Book of Mormon’s rich cultural resonances are only ever inferred and never demonstrated in this biography. For example, Gutjahr never shows how revelation itself appears in the Book of Mormon; he just explains that the book was likely produced through revelation in a time of competing revelations. Likewise, he never interprets a passage in the Book of Mormon through the eyes of an antebellum reader to show how one might experience its particular narrative as resonant with his or her antebellum spiritual experience. In one chapter, he suggests that different Mormon sects use the Book of Mormon differently, but never says how; in a later chapter, he describes how translating the book into different languages is difficult, but never explores what specific theological or interpretive consequences this challenging work of translation might have. I cite these examples in a row not to accuse Gutjahr of failing to pursue the social relevancy of the Book of Mormon. Rather, I list them in order to indicate how carefully Gutjahr seems to avoid the content of the book altogether, quoting it fewer than twenty times in this two-hundred-page biography.

To be sure, Gutjahr’s assiduous evasion of his designated text could be in deference to the limits set by the Princeton series of which this volume is a part, Lives of Great Religious Books. The promotional text advertises that this series will offer books that “examine the historical origins of texts from the great religious traditions, and trace how their reception, interpretation, and influence have changed—often radically over time.” While it seems reasonable to track any given volume as an object formed through history, the decision by Princeton to select works from the “great religious traditions” forecloses the process of deciding
what a tradition, or what greatness, might be, other than by the fact of their appearance in this series. And without such a process of justification, Gutjahr produces a book that explains nothing about Mormonism as a religion of a particular book. This is unfortunate since a central question posed to Mormons—perhaps, as Orson Pratt suggests, the central question—has always been, and continues to be, “Why do you believe this book?”

And although Grant Hardy and Terryl Givens have supplied replies to this question (I am especially an admirer of Hardy’s work, which offers such phenomenal textual analysis), both of them remain, in this reviewer’s estimation, too close to the book to make a truly powerful case for it. In other words, both Hardy and Givens clearly begin and end their analysis with the presumption that the Book of Mormon is scripture, whereas I think this is a point that requires historical, philosophical, and anthropological argument. “That all books might be or become bibles does not mean all of them are,” writes Nancy Levene in her examination of Spinoza’s critique of the Bible. “We will and we must adapt the sacred to our mind only because the sacred, like the mind, comprehends the difference between itself and the very many profane versions into which it will fall.”

A bible worth the name is unafraid of resistant readers or heretical attack because it includes its own critique. This is how a text begets movements: through its internal enactment of interpretation. Does the Book of Mormon possess this attribute?

To be clear, Gutjahr offers many hints (borrowing on Givens’s work in particular) as to what made the book so appealing in its time. Gutjahr reminds us that the Book of Mormon finds a way to meld together an “Old Testament historical feel” with “a distinct focus on Jesus Christ” and that it offers a “complex and detailed” Christology (p. 8). But we then hear little else about that Christology, or about that melding. “The Book of Mormon is Trinitarian in nature and a strong proponent of monogamy” is one of the few moments Gutjahr describes the specific

propositional content of the Book of Mormon (p. 66). This comment, coupled with the broader historiography of Mormonism, reminds us how much of LDS Church history was not a result of interpreting its founding scripture, but of working through the ongoing revelatory practice set by its prophet and continued by subsequent leaders. Furthermore, we’re reminded by Gutjahr that Mormons, especially the Utah Saints who came to define Mormon orthodoxy, “paid less attention to the Book of Mormon than they did to the Bible” (p. 97). So an uninformed reader of Gutjahr’s volume could walk away from it believing that even Mormons themselves care less about this book than they do about the Bible or Doctrine and Covenants. This is a conclusion that at the very least is at odds with the book’s enormous ongoing print run (with nearly 350,000 copies issuing forth from its publishing center every month) and heavy use in missionary work.

As for Gutjahr, he reveals to us a great deal more—in engaging detail—about the book’s formatting and production, its history of translation, and its visual culture than its content. In one evocative instance, Gutjahr reminds us of the significant effort painter Minerva Teichert (1888–1976) made to “bring forward the female elements of the book, carefully evoking the story’s feminine side” when she visually depicted scenes from the Book of Mormon (p. 162). Later in the same chapter, when writing about Arnold Friberg’s illustrations, Gutjahr describes his work as capturing the “gender politics of the Book of Mormon’s narrative,” a narrative that Gutjahr then describes as “profoundly masculine” (p. 170). Which is it, a book with a “feminine side” or a “profoundly masculine” text? Or, if both, how so? Through textual analysis, Gutjahr might have exhibited moments of tension in the Book of Mormon, tensions that might have given rise to multiple interpretations. Yet he suggests that there are not multiple interpretations to be culled from the book. He casts Teichert as striving in vain since the Book of Mormon is, in this account, resiliently simple in its gender story. And so at the end of Gutjahr’s biography, the Book of Mormon seems to be more of a print commodity starring superhero warriors than a series of historical or metaphysical propositions. I am sure this is far from Gutjahr’s intention, but in his
strange avoidance of the Book of Mormon, he seems to suggest it isn’t worth reading. And so the reader is left without much idea as to how the book could be scripture: that is, a book to which its readers are asked to return again and again with acts of interpretation and interrogation that define its maintenance as a sacred object.

In her blurb for Gutjahr’s biography, literary scholar and Mormon memoirist Joanna Brooks writes, “The Book of Mormon is among the most influential books in American history.” If Brooks argues that it is a book that has excited large numbers of people to migration and social commitment, then I would agree. Yet I would have to stipulate, immediately, I do not know why it did. From the rich historiography of early Mormonism, I know how early Mormons organized and why certain of its theologies tugged successfully on certain individuals, certain familial pressures, and denominational gaps. I know about connections between the Book of Mormon and prophetic tradition, about it and the history of race, about it in the context of frontier development, about it as a repository of a diversity of revelatory and hermetic traditions. But I cannot, still, see it as scripture amid all this context and connection. The Book of Mormon seems to me to be still one of the loudest unexplained books in religious history. We know to respect this book of Mormon, even as none of us have any reason to say why it is the book for Mormons (or, possibly, for anyone else). And so I continue to wait for an account of the book that tells me why it isn’t just another missionary gift gathering dust, but a profound scripture, a book that I have failed to truly see.

Kathryn Lofton is professor of religious studies, American studies, history, and divinity at Yale University. Her first book, Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon, was published by the University of California Press in 2011. She is currently working on several projects, including a study of sexuality and Protestant fundamentalism, an analysis of the culture concept of the Goldman Sachs Group, and a religious history of Bob Dylan.