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The Book of Mormon: A Biography

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

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Reviewed by Tod R Harris

There is something of a paradox prevalent in academic religious studies: In order to consider a community and its traditions objectively, one should not be a member of that community; yet the only way to understand fully and appreciate and therefore faithfully report about the community is to be a member. Many times this contradiction leads to the unfortunate situation where “outsiders” do not report their findings objectively or accurately and thus disappoint those hoping for fair and informative treatment, and where the work of members attempting serious scholarly analysis of their own community is viewed with suspicion and distrust because of their perceived lack of objectivity. The state of affairs has improved in recent years with well-received work coming out of many of the communities themselves, particularly the Islamic community.¹ Mormon studies, unfortunately, often finds itself in a position where nonmember academics produce work that is incomplete, biased, or, in some cases, flat-out wrong, and where LDS scholars are not even invited to contribute.²

1. A notable case in point is the conference on the Qur’an convened by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London every other year. I attended this conference in November 2011 and was deeply impressed by the high quality, thorough treatment, and objective nature of all the papers, whether given by Muslim or non-Muslim scholars. For a list of session topics and papers, see <http://www.soas.ac.uk/islamicstudies/conferences/quran2011/>.

2. In stark contrast to my experiences at SOAS was a session of the annual American Academy of Religion meeting I attended in November 2005, called “What the Study of Mormonism Brings to Religious Studies: A Special AAR Session Organized on the Occasion of the Bicentennial of Joseph Smith’s Birth.” Though all presenters were noted biblical or religious studies scholars, I was very concerned about the lack of knowledge and serious study of the subject on the part of these luminaries in their field, most of whom at some point in their papers stated that they did not know much about Mormonism and then proceeded to say things that were unfounded, biased, or simply wrong. If these scholars had done the same thing in a session about

There are heartening signs of change for the better even here, though, one of them being the recent publication of *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* by Paul C. Gutjahr. This book, though short, is an engaging and generally positive overview of the origin and impact of the Book of Mormon by a serious non-LDS scholar. The book is part of Princeton University Press's Lives of Great Religious Books series, a series designed to "recount the complex and fascinating histories of important religious texts from around the world."³ Other volumes in the series include treatments of Exodus, Job, the Qur'an, the Baghavad Gita, and even Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. Though Latter-day Saints have long known that the Book of Mormon is an "important religious text," it is encouraging to see it considered as such by a prestigious American university. And if an LDS scholar could not have written *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*, then Paul Gutjahr is a particularly well-qualified non-Mormon writer.

Gutjahr is a professor of English, American studies, and religious studies at Indiana University Bloomington, where he researches and teaches courses in American literature and culture from 1640 to 1860, the history of the book in America, and American religious and intellectual thought. These interests have led Gutjahr to write extensively on the production of the English Bible in America, and much of this research is summarized in his earlier publication *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880*. A book about the influence of the Book of Mormon on American religious thought and culture is an appropriate follow-up volume, and Gutjahr does an admirable job of presenting information that objectively informs non-LDS readers about "the book that gave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints its popular name" and in a way that is appreciative of the Church and its respect for the book as "the most important religious text ever to emerge from the United States" (10).

Buddhism or Islam or even medieval Christianity, it would have seriously damaged their professional credibility. Noted LDS scholars (including John W. Welch and John Gee) were also in attendance that day and shared my concern. For a list of papers and their presenters, see the listing for session A20-53 at http://www.aarweb.org/Meetings/Annual_Meeting/Past_and_Future_Meetings/2005/program_book.asp. There is other, more current evidence (besides Gutjahr's book) that the situation is improving, as for example the recent "Mormon in America" program on NBC's *Rock Center*. The Church's "Mormon Newsroom" blog called the program "evenhanded," though some aspects were also considered "insensitive" (see the KSL website, August 30, 2012, <http://www.ksl.com/index.php?nid=1016&sid=21931840>).

3. Princeton University Press website, July 18, 2012, <http://press.princeton.edu/catalogs/series/lgrb.html>.

Gutjahr demonstrates early in his book the kind of intuitive understanding of his subject—usually reserved for long-standing community members—with the clever structuring of his book. He arranges it around one of the central metaphors from the Book of Mormon itself: “Now we will compare the word unto a seed” (from Alma 32:28, which he quotes on page 1)—with each part reflecting the stages of a seed’s development. Part 1, “Germination,” discusses the emergence of the Book of Mormon. Chapter 1, “Joseph’s Golden Bible,” offers a concise but informative overview of the historical origins of the Book of Mormon that for the most part parallels the Church’s official account. Chapter 2 is a summary of distinctly non-LDS theories that try to explain the Book of Mormon. The title of this chapter, “Holy Writ or Humbug?” sets up the dichotomy Gutjahr explores. Despite the provocative ideas he presents, the tone of this part is generally positive and respectful to the Church’s perspective. As an example, Gutjahr states in his summary what he sees as one of Joseph Smith’s chief objectives: “Telling anyone who would listen, Joseph proclaimed that God had not only spoken to the ancient Jews of the Middle East; he had spoken to the ancient inhabitants of the Americas. More importantly, Joseph wished those around him to realize that God was still speaking, and in his inscrutable wisdom had chosen Joseph as the Prophet ordained to inaugurate a new biblical age” (37).

This last idea serves as an appropriate springboard to Part 2, “Budding,” and its first chapter, “Multiplying Prophets.” Gutjahr informs his readers that “absolutely central to any understanding of the religious power and influence of [the Book of Mormon] is the prophetic figure who ushered it into the world” (61). He then presents a fast-paced review of Joseph’s role in developing the Church that sprang up around the book he translated, first in Kirtland and then in Nauvoo, as well as a consideration of those who succeeded Joseph, particularly all the splinter groups that arose after Joseph was killed at Carthage jail. This chapter is notable for its account of “how each of these sects developed its own special relationship to the *Book of Mormon*” (69), which is a history many current LDS members may not be familiar with. The overview of the engagement of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (known as the Community of Christ since 2001) with the Book of Mormon is especially interesting.

The next chapter returns specifically to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and provides an account of the development of the Church’s attitude toward and use of the Book of Mormon as it grew and expanded from a somewhat isolated community in the 1860s to an institution with worldwide influence and presence by the end of the twentieth century. And here again, Gutjahr provides a superb summary of a period and

perspective that may not be well known by most members of the Church as he charts the slow shift among LDS scholars and leaders from what can almost be seen as an avoidance of any kind of dependence on the book to the overwhelming emphasis of its importance to the mission of the Church today. He makes particular note of the work of Hugh Nibley on the scholarly side and of President Ezra Taft Benson on the ecclesiastical. As he prepares to enter the final phase of his overview of what he calls the “life” of the Book of Mormon (10), Gutjahr writes that President Benson is “perhaps most accurately described as a kind of culminating catalyst whose presidency served as a tipping point within the Church that propelled the Book of Mormon to the forefront of LDS consciousness” (109). He concludes that “since the 1980s the LDS Church has engaged its founding text with unprecedented energy and resources” (109).

The third and final part, “Flowering,” comprehensively presents the various ways the Church (and others) have in fact “engaged” the Book of Mormon and the ways in which the book, in turn, has exerted a wide-ranging influence. With his chapters “Missionary Work and the Book,” “Scholars and the Book,” “Illustrating the Book,” and “The Book on Stage and Screen,” Gutjahr again demonstrates the depth of his own research and engagement throughout this part with often fascinating treatments of the topics at hand. The chapter on missionary work is notable for its overview of the history of the various translations of the Book of Mormon, as well as its careful and accurate description of the process the Church uses to find and train translators and then support them in the work they do.⁴

“Scholars and the Book” reviews much of the work that Mormon apologists such as the researchers at FARMS (the Foundation of Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, subsumed into the Neal A. Maxwell Institute at BYU in 2006) and its affiliates have contributed to an understanding of the possible historical and cultural origins of the Book of Mormon, noting especially the geographic and anthropological work of John Sorenson and the linguistic and text critical studies of Royal Skousen. In a particularly sympathetic nod to an important perspective the Church has always maintained with regard to scholarly studies of the Book of Mormon, Gutjahr is careful to note that “Church leaders continue to emphasize that one’s relationship

4. I must confess to my own lack of objectivity regarding this point. As part of his research Dr. Gutjahr spent several days at Church headquarters in the summer of 2011, including almost an entire day with me. During that time I had the opportunity to explain the Church’s scripture translation process to him and demonstrate many of the tools and methods we use. Dr. Gutjahr has done a very nice job summarizing the torrent of information I presented him with that day.

to the *Book of Mormon* and the religious practice it engenders is based on personal revelatory confirmation and is primarily a matter of faith” (146).

Readers next get a look at the various ways artists have endeavored to portray the images and themes of the Book of Mormon throughout its history. Well-known works from painters such as Minerva Teichert and Arnold Friberg make an appearance, as well as important but obscure representations such as Michael Allred’s comic book series, *The Golden Plates*. Here Gutjahr also provides interesting sociological commentary on the overtly Mesoamerican influence on much of Book of Mormon artwork and how that presentation continues to inform the way Church members think about the book, even while the Church itself now downplays overt connections.

The last chapter, “The Book on Screen and Stage,” reviews the different attempts to portray Book of Mormon themes and images over the years through these mediums. Because most are not well known, even among members, the descriptions of movies based on the Book of Mormon is fascinating. Perhaps the most entertaining of these deals with Lester Park’s 1931 independent film *Corianton: A Story of Unholy Love*, whose storyline is “based on a theatrical adaptation of an 1889 story published by B. H. Roberts” (180) and for which the Tabernacle Choir granted permission for use of its music. The rare stills Gutjahr located to illustrate his case provide fascinating context and are astoundingly graphic for a film from this era.

Gutjahr devotes his final pages to some of the major Book of Mormon pageants, “an art form that the LDS Church has kept alive since the early twentieth century” (188) and “an important part of Mormon culture” (189). He describes what is arguably the most famous of these, the Hill Cumorah Pageant, with a particularly poignant observation: “On the very hillside where Joseph reportedly first uncovered the golden plates, the Church has been able to recapture some of the dramatic magic of that discovery” (192). Gutjahr also includes here a short summary of the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. Though arguably necessary for a thorough treatment of the subject at hand, by so doing he runs the risk of offending some LDS readers who may be jarred by the close juxtaposition of the Hill Cumorah pageant with a play most Latter-day Saints would consider blasphemous. The book concludes with two useful appendices: a descriptive chronology of significant English editions of the Book of Mormon and a comprehensive table of the translations of the Book of Mormon into other languages.

Despite all that is good about Gutjahr’s book, there are some things slightly amiss that should be noted. The most serious of these has to do with the sources Gutjahr uses. Though the scholarship is generally solid, he does not make clear which of his sources are objective and which are negatively

biased (though that exercise itself might be seen as introducing bias into the treatments; still, LDS readers will recognize many of the sources as unsympathetic). For example, throughout his presentation of competing theories of Book of Mormon origins in “Holy Writ or Humbug?” (chapter 2), Gutjahr simply lists the theories and does not comment on the group presenting the theory. He discusses a 2008 study conducted by “a group of scholars at Stanford University led by Matthew L. Jockers” (50) that purported to produce evidence using “sophisticated linguistic computer modeling” (50) that Sidney Rigdon was the chief “author” of the Book of Mormon, yet does not cite the work done by Paul Fields and others published in the same journal as the Jockers study (the *Journal of Literary and Linguistic Computing*, January 2011 issue) that criticizes and largely refutes the conclusions of Jockers’s group.⁵ Other missteps include describing Joseph as the “self-proclaimed author” of the Book of Mormon (11), Joseph joining the Methodist church at about twelve years old (14), and Joseph giving details about the translation process that he in reality never gave (23–24).

Less serious but still noteworthy, there are a number of ideas and turns of phrase that let LDS readers know that the author, though trying hard, still lacks a true community insider’s view. For example, in describing Joseph’s and Oliver’s experience with John the Baptist during their translation work, Gutjahr notes that the angel told them that later they would be “ordained into a higher priesthood, which would allow them to baptize with the power of the Holy Ghost” (40). Not being familiar with the ordinance, he concatenates two distinct rites into one. A little later he describes the Book of Mormon as “Trinitarian in nature” (66) when numerous LDS theological treatises argue the Book of Mormon is in fact strongly anti-Trinitarian. As a final illustration, as he writes about the Corianton film described above, he notes that this episode made such good subject matter because otherwise “the stories that fill the *Book of Mormon* are almost entirely devoid of sex and romance” (182). Yet the story of the movie is liberally fabricated from a very short passage in the Book of Mormon that mentions Corianton’s indiscretion with the “harlot Isabel” (Alma 39:3). Faithful readers generally do not perceive passages of the Book of Mormon as being particularly salacious.

Finally, Gutjahr misses the opportunity to describe other media, such as literature, that take the Book of Mormon as inspiration, perhaps most notably Orson Scott Card’s Alvin Maker series (where Alvin is a thinly veiled

5. For more information, see <http://llc.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/01/18/llc.fqq029.abstract> and <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700169259/FAIR-Wordprint-analysis-and-the-Book-of-Mormon.html?pg=all>.

version of Joseph Smith) and his Homecoming series (where the plot of at least the first several books parallels the narrative in perhaps the first third of the Book of Mormon). Gutjahr indicates he wanted to include a chapter on the Book of Mormon and fiction but had a strict word limit so regretfully had to leave that topic out.⁶

Nevertheless, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* is overall a delight. Non-LDS readers should find the book interesting enough to provoke them to learn more, and perhaps even to read the Book of Mormon itself. And yet, though this group (interested non-LDS readers) seems to be the intended audience, members of the Church will find enough new information (or at least information related to aspects of the Book about which they might not have thought or even been aware) to come away having learned something about their foundation scripture. In his overview of “Scholars and the Book” (chapter 6), Gutjahr makes a critical point: “For decades treatments of the book have largely fallen into two camps: Mormon education and apologetic texts and Evangelical works attacking the book’s veracity. The Book of Mormon has now emerged as a legitimate focal point of academic study” (151).

Gutjahr’s own book is a terrific example of a work typifying legitimate academic study, particularly as compared with most of the poor mistreatments of Mormon studies. It is balanced and engaging enough to give non-LDS readers a clear insight into what members consider a truly divine work and, perhaps more importantly, accurate and honest enough to satisfy LDS readers. The book admirably fulfills both the goal of the series of which it is part, as well as demonstrates the sentiment Gutjahr expresses in conclusion: “Not everyone may believe its contents, but fewer and fewer can continue to doubt the importance the [Book of Mormon] holds in American history and culture” (195).

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6. Email correspondence with Paul C. Gutjahr, June 14, 2012. Paul also writes, “I do think about writing an article about it [the Book of Mormon and fiction] for *BYU Studies*.”