

## A Big Task for a Small Book

Paul C. Gutjahr. *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*. Princeton University Press, 2012. 280 pp. Cloth: \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-69114-480-1

*Reviewed by Michael Austin*

Paul Gutjahr's *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* is one of the inaugural offerings from Princeton University Press's *Lives of Great Religious Books*—a series that proposes a new lens for studying major religious texts such as the *I-Ching*, the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The books in this series move away from the textual analysis and explication normally found in scholarly monographs and focus instead on the reception of sacred works. “Written for general readers by leading authors and experts,” the Press advertises, “these books 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.”

Paul C. Gutjahr is an excellent choice to treat the Book of Mormon in this series. Though not well known in Mormon circles, Gutjahr is a pioneer in the field of “History of the Book” studies, an academic specialty that studies how texts function within the societies that produce and consume them. In previous books, Gutjahr has examined how both the Bible and popular literature functioned in nineteenth-century America, so he comes to the current project with a deep knowledge of nineteenth-century print culture, especially as it applies to religious texts. This background is well suited for analyzing the Book of Mormon's reception, and it allows for some unexpected insights into the history of the text.

Most of these insights involve the way the Book of Mormon has evolved over the past 180 years, both as a physical text and as a cultural object. Gutjahr painstakingly documents the formatting changes between 1830 and 1920 that created the Book of Mormon as we know it today. These changes standardized the language, shortened the paragraphs, added verse numbers, and presented the text in two columns per page, transforming it from

something that “read more like a novel or historical work” to a book that “took on the air of a sacred, biblical text” (96–97). He also analyzes the illustrations by George Reynolds, Minerva Teichert, and Arnold Friberg that have become part of the Book of Mormon’s extended text. And he provides exceptional insights into the challenges posed by translation—the need to preserve the core meaning of the text while remaining sensitive to different cultures and shifting perceptions. I did not know until I read the book, for example, that the Church prints all Japanese copies of the Book of Mormon on cream-colored paper because white is associated with death in that culture, or that LDS graphic designers had to create a new, 20,000-character font in order to publish the Book of Mormon in Urdu.

More important than the shifts in the book’s appearance are the corresponding shifts in its theological role within the LDS Church (and, to a lesser extent, within the RLDS Church/Community of Christ). In the case of the former, Gutjahr demonstrates that LDS theological discourse was essentially biblical from the days of Joseph Smith until the 1980s. This changed radically during the presidency of Ezra Taft Benson. The standard missionary lessons were refashioned to introduce Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon in the first discussion, Church materials began to incorporate Book of Mormon citations where biblical citations had appeared earlier, and Latter-day Saints were exhorted to read the Book of Mormon regularly. Benson, Gutjahr concludes, was “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).

Gutjahr does a good job of incorporating modern scholarship on the Book of Mormon into the narrative of its reception. He shows how the work of such figures as Hugh Nibley and John Sorenson helped to support the Church’s renewed emphasis on the Book of Mormon in the 1980s. At the same time, this scholarly activity led the Church to make the rare concession of backing away, however subtly, from earlier claims about the ancestry of the American Indians. The introduction to the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon, Gutjahr reports, “described the Lamanites as ‘the principal ancestors of the American Indians,’ departing from the Church’s previous, more expansive claim that every Na-

tive American was descended from Lamanite stock” (142-43). Gutjahr ably shows how the early LDS apologetic scholarship blossomed into a much larger academic interest in the book by Mormon and non-Mormon scholars alike—a phenomenon which, he acknowledges, accounts for *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* itself.

Gutjahr does not present himself as a historian of Mormonism, though about the first quarter of his book addresses Joseph Smith and the origin of Mormonism. In recounting the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Gutjahr relies heavily on Joseph Smith’s own account from the current LDS Pearl of Great Price. He brings in other proposed explanations (such as the Spaulding theory or the single-author theory), but largely, and very appropriately, brackets the question of divine revelation to focus on the text as an unquestionably influential phenomenon. Surprisingly, though, he says very little about what is actually in the Book of Mormon, giving only the briefest summary of its contents in his prologue (7-8). Many of Gutjahr’s readers, of course, will already be familiar with the Book of Mormon; however, a more developed overview would have made *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* more useful for those coming to the book without such content knowledge.

Ultimately, however, it is not Paul Gutjahr’s job to explain what is in the Book of Mormon. And it is certainly not his job to argue for or against its truth or divinity. These are jobs for much longer books, many of which have already been written. Gutjahr, on the other hand, sets out to do something nobody else has ever quite done before: to trace the ways that the reception of the Book of Mormon has evolved over nearly two hundred years and in more than a hundred languages. He takes us from the earliest views of the text as either a divine revelation or a blatant fraud all the way to its recent status as the basis of a hit Broadway musical. This is a big task for a small book, and *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* does it exceptionally well.