

The Book of Mormon: A Biography, by Paul C. Gutjahr. Princeton University Press, 2012. 280pp., 23 b&w halftones, hb., \$24.95/£16.95. ISBN-13: 9780691144801.

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As a European, living in Belgium, I have been surprised about the importance attached to religion in the last two races for the White House. In 2008, Barack Obama was branded a Muslim by some and, however illogical, he must, therefore, either be a terrorist or at least have links with terrorists. In 2012 hardly a day goes by that there is not something on the news, in papers, in magazines, or on the internet about Mormonism, the religion of presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

In spite of all the attention given over the past few months to Mormonism, much remains unknown about this faith and its primary sacred text, the Book of Mormon. Whether or not intentional, Princeton University Press' time of publication of Paul C. Gutjahr's *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* was impeccable. The book is part of Princeton's new series of "short volumes that recount the complex and fascinating histories of important religious texts from around the world" (back flap). It is an informative yet easy-to-read overview of the Book of Mormon's life and it goes a long way to fill some of the above mentioned void.

As the title already suggests, this book does not focus on the actual content of the Book of Mormon—its story line, characters or doctrinal message. Instead it takes the reader on a journey through Mormon history, as it were through the eyes of the Book of Mormon, starting from its emergence during the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century until the present day. Notwithstanding the fact that this method of presentation is probably largely the result of the aim of Princeton's *Lives of Great Religious Books* series of which this book is a part, it also opens a way to approach Mormonism and the Book of Mormon from a completely different, perhaps less controversial, angle. It allows the author to completely circumvent such questions as whether or not the book is a divinely inspired holy writ or the fruit of Joseph Smith's imagination, whether or not Joseph Smith was a prophet, and ques-

tions of this ilk. Instead Gutjahr was able to chart the influence the Book of Mormon has had, not only on the Mormon community in the USA and abroad but also its influence as “a contemporary religious text with global influence” (9). In doing so he was able to present various aspects of the life of the Book of Mormon, ranging from Mormon and non-Mormon scholarship on the book of Mormon to examining the transformations of the Book of Mormon into children’s books, motion pictures, Broadway shows and pageants such as the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Therefore, the strength of the book is its broad overview of the life and influence of the Book of Mormon which makes it interesting for a reader who is less familiar with Mormonism in general and the Book of Mormon in particular. Furthermore, I am sure that also many Mormons can learn a thing or two if they read the book.

Gutjahr structured the book in three parts—Germination (prologue and two chapters), Budding (two chapters), and Flowering (four chapters). A verse taken from the Book of Mormon itself introduces each part. There are also two appendices. Appendix one lists chronologically notable English editions of the Book of Mormon, whereas appendix two is a list of 109 Book of Mormon translations beginning with the 1830 English translation and ending with the 2008 Sinhala translation of the full Book of Mormon. Each entry contains the original publication year, whether the translation is the full book or only selections from the book, and the publication year of the present edition. This is somewhat confusing as the cursory reader may think that the book of Mormon was translated into 109 languages whereas the actual number is less. Some language editions containing only selections were later turned into complete translations, and are therefore counted twice, e.g. Sinhala (nos. 59 and 109). Moreover, Gutjahr’s listing system is not consistent as e.g. Arabic selections of 1980 (no.39) are not relisted in 1986 when the full book was published. These are, however, not major flaws and do not diminish the contribution of this book to the general knowledge about the Book of Mormon.

It is clear that Gutjahr read both Mormon and non-Mormon sources and has a thorough grasp of the subject matter. As a result it is neutral, balanced and, in my opinion, more accessible book than many materials published by the Mormon Church itself. It is a well-written, erudite yet easy to read account of the history of the Book of Mormon. Although the author is not a Mormon himself, he treats his subject with respect and thoughtfulness without losing sight of scholarly rigor. This is perhaps best illustrated in chapter 6 (137–152) where Gutjahr shows that “while LDS Church leaders concentrate on a faith-based relationship with the text, the Church does have a long

history of members who have valued a rationalist approach to the book as well” (137). He then provides quite a comprehensive overview of Mormon scholarship and non-Mormon scholarship on the Book of Mormon including an overview of Mormon instigated DNA research that failed to debunk the current non-Mormon theory that the Native American Indians do not have roots in the Middle East (145). Through this overview Gutjahr shows that there is “an important shift in the ground where discussions of the book are taking place” (151). Gone are the times when there were only two camps, one wholly positive and the other wholly negative.

Another chapter that gained my curiosity is chapter 5 on the Book of Mormon as a missionary tool. Besides describing the expansion of missionary work in Eastern Europe and Africa and problems inherent with the long-standing policy denying the priesthood to people of black African descent (abolished in 1978), Gutjahr takes the reader, as it were, behind the scenes and shows the process and pitfalls of translating the Book of Mormon in various languages. The average time it takes for the Book of Mormon to be translated apparently is 4.8 years while some such as the Urdu translation took 15 years (130–131). Gutjahr also shows that spreading the Book of Mormon is not only an issue of translating the book and handing it out to the missionary force but that there are also cultural sensitivities to be taken into consideration such as suitable fonts and the colour of paper (132). This information might be seen as irrelevant by some but it certainly piqued my curiosity and added value to the book.

Even though some might argue that Gutjahr too quickly glances over controversial issues of history and authenticity regarding the Book of Mormon, I think this has more to do with the framework of the series than a concerted effort to avoid said issues. Gutjahr succeeded in writing an informative account of the history of the Book of Mormon. His style provides enough information for those who are just curious about the Book of Mormon and Mormonism while at the same time satisfying a more interested reader’s curiosity by providing a platform for further research.

