

Review: JAR1372

OVERVIEW OF BOOK OF MORMON MISSES THE “OTHER SIDE”

a book review of
The Book of Mormon: A Biography
by Paul C. Gutjahr

(Princeton University Press, 2012)

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Princeton University Press has published a series of seven short volumes titled “Lives of Great Religious Books,” including reviews of *The Book of Common Prayer* and the *I Ching* as well as books penned by Augustine and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 2012, non-Mormon scholar Paul C. Gutjahr spent 255 pages in a small 4.5x8-inch book overviewing the Book of Mormon.

Previous books written by Gutjahr include a look at the American Bible from 1777–1880 and a biography on Charles Hodge. *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* is the first book that this college professor of English has written on the subject of Mormonism. The publisher obviously decided to choose a neutral observer to analyze what Joseph Smith called “the most correct book on earth.” After all, if a Latter-day Saint pens this book, critics might complain about a pro-church bias. On the other hand, a critic of Mormonism writing this work would certainly be called “anti-Mormon.”

If anyone was keeping tally, I’m sure fewer Latter-day Saints would object to this work than Christian apologists such as me, who have spent many years studying the religion from original sources. When the author says on page 9 that “it is increasingly hard to argue against the growing scholarly consensus that ‘the Book of Mormon should rank among the great achievements of American literature,’” this is technically true, since the book has had a huge influence on a great number of people. Yet the Mormon scripture is promoted as a story of history, not fiction. Since there is a lack of supporting archaeological or historical evidence for its narrative, it does not live up to its billing. If the genre is confused, how can this rightly be called a “great achievement of American literature”?

When referring to Smith on page 15, Gutjahr writes, “In an effort to bring clarity to his spiritual quest, he decided to take the Bible at its word when it encouraged, ‘If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God’ (James 1:5).” Yet Smith’s use of this

isolated verse is *not* taking “the Bible at its word” because it has been torn from its context. After all, the believer is instructed to seek God for *wisdom* (especially when trials and temptations come, as the context explains) and not *knowledge*. James never intended for people to pray about the truthfulness of a particular religious book or religion. Gutjahr appears to accept too much at face value.

Face-Value Faith. The author also fails to consider the possibility that the LDS portrayal of certain events might be one-sided. For example, he provides only one paragraph to describe a three-mile trek that supposedly took place when Smith brought the Book of Mormon’s gold plates to his home on September 22, 1827. According to his mother Lucy Mack Smith, Smith departed the Hill Cumorah with the plates under his arm. Three times, she said, he was ambushed by attackers, causing his thumb to break in the last scuffle.¹ If the plates were made of gold in the dimensions claimed by Smith—a sixth of a cubit foot—they would have weighed two hundred pounds. The journey described by his mother—verified by a church manual²—would have been an impossible feat for any human being. Whether he knew about this problem or not, the author decided to say nothing more than “Joseph and Emma returned to the Smith farm” with the plates.³ Careful research would have unearthed such problematic elements in the story.

Referring to the issue of who besides Joseph Smith ever saw the original gold plates on which the Book of Mormon was written, Gutjahr recounts a story about how the “Three Witnesses” —Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer—wanted to see the plates for themselves, as Smith was very protective of them. One day Smith directed the three to a field to pray. When the plates didn’t materialize, Martin Harris blamed himself and walked away. Once Harris was gone, “an angel holding the plates appeared to the others. Cowdery later reported: ‘I beheld them with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated’” (p. 28).

One historical volume recounts how Smith “left David and Oliver and went in pursuit of Martin Harris, whom I found at a considerable distance fervently engaged in prayer.”⁴ Both men prayed and, according to Smith, “the same vision was opened to our view.” Notice that this was a “vision” and not a physical sighting. After all, why would a person need to pray about seeing a tangible object, such as the hefty plates from which Smith supposedly translated? If something is physically present, a person just needs to open his or her eyes for it to be seen. When Gutjahr refers to Smith and the eleven total witnesses as “the only people in the modern era ever to see this ancient golden record” (28), it gives the wrong impression that the witnesses actually did see the plates with their own eyes.

Witness with an Agenda. In another chapter, Emma Smith, Joseph’s first wife, is described as having retained her testimony in the Book of Mormon until her dying day. The author said that she remained “absolutely convinced that the book was divinely inspired, telling their son, Joseph Smith III, that his father ‘could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon’” (46). This may sound like an impressive testimony, but it must be noted how

Emma gave the appearance for many years that her husband was not polygamous. Besides telling an interviewer a few years before her death that “Joseph Smith could not have written such a book without inspiration,” she also denied in the same interview that her husband had ever practiced polygamy.⁵ But LDS historians have shown beyond a shadow of a doubt how Emma certainly knew about Smith’s polygamous ways.⁶ It appears that Emma was trying to protect her family, including her son Joseph Smith III, the leader of the Reorganized Church that held to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and rejected plural marriage.

Quite often Gutjahr goes out of his way not to offend his LDS readers by siding with information agreeing with the Mormon point of view. Referring to an altar found in Yemen on page 106, he writes, “Certain letters on this altar possibly correspond to the place name ‘Nahom’ referred to by Nephi as his party passed through this Middle Eastern region.” Found on this ancient altar were three letters: the consonants NHM. There are many possibilities to the meaning, as it depends on which vowels are used and where they are placed. The altar’s discovery was first reported in the back of an LDS magazine, saying, “This is the first archaeological find that supports a Book of Mormon place-name other than Jerusalem or the Red Sea.”⁷ However, it appears that no reputable non-LDS archaeologist agrees with this assessment. And if the church has nothing more than Jerusalem, the Red Sea, and the Nahom inscription as evidence for the book’s historicity, then it must be admitted that the archaeological record lends little support.

Archaeological Aberrations. While Gutjahr does give space to discuss the genesis of the Limited Geography Theory, a view held by many LDS scholars placing the Book of Mormon events in a small area of Central America, he misses the opportunity to explain adequately the current controversy of the book’s setting. Rejecting the Limited Geography Theory, some Mormons continue to hold to the Hemispheric Geography Theory, which suggests that the Book of Mormon took place on both North and South America. Another popular view, held by prominent Mormons such as Rodney Meldrum and Glenn Beck, insists on the Heartland Geography Model that advocates a position of how the book’s events took place solely on the North American continent. An analysis of this fascinating debate would have fit very well in this volume.

Gutjahr did not discuss new changes to the Book of Mormon because they were not announced until after the 2012 publication of his book. In February 2013, church leaders described how revisions to official photos and maps would be made, along with revised introductory heading adjustments to seventy-six sections of the Book of Commandments. Some of these changes are minor while others are attempts to deal with recent technology. For example, the previous edition (1981) included this remark in the introduction: “After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are the principal ancestors of the American Indians.” The 2013 revision replaces “the principal ancestors” with the words “among the ancestors,” most likely because recent DNA research shows that Native Americans have Asiatic, not Semitic, roots.

While I don't believe the author was as critical with the information as I, a Christian apologist, would have liked, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* is very readable and portrays the Mormon position well. At the same time, for the reader who wants a more in-depth study of the Book of Mormon, especially its origins, there are other available resources that I would recommend first.⁸ —Eric Johnson

Eric Johnson has coauthored *Mormonism 101* (Baker, 2000) and *Answering Mormons' Questions* (Kregel, 2013) with Bill McKeever. Their website is www.mrm.org.

NOTES

- 1 *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, Lucy Mack Smith*, 107–8.
- 2 See *Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, 45.
- 3 For more information about the weight of the plates, see Bill McKeever, "Problems with the Gold Plates of the Book of Mormon," *Christian Research Journal* 34, 2 (2011).
- 4 *History of the Church* 1:55.
- 5 Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 298.
- 6 For example, see pp. 75–77 of *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989) by Richard S. Van Wagoner and pp. 293–94 of *Sidney Rigdon: Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006) by Richard Lyman Bushman.
- 7 "Book of Mormon Linked to Site in Yemen," *Ensign*, February 2001, 79.
- 8 For one, consider David Persuitte's *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2000).