

### B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon

*Studies of the Book of Mormon* by B. H. Roberts, edited and with an introduction by Brigham D. Madsen, with biographical essay by Sterling M. McMurrin (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 375 pp., \$21.95.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander, professor of history and director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University. He thanks Brigham Madsen, Sterling McMurrin, John Welch, and Truman Madsen for their comments.

THE THREE MANUSCRIPTS by B. H. Roberts which form the core of this book first came to my attention in 1980 while I was at work on *Mormonism in Transition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). At that time, George D. Smith, a San Francisco businessman, was kind enough to supply me with copies of the manuscripts. Then, he indicated that he and Everett L. Cooley, director of the Marriott Library's Special Collections who had accessioned the B. H. Roberts papers, were interested in having the manuscripts edited and published.

Cooley arranged for the editorial work and an introductory essay on Roberts's life for the volume. Brigham D. Madsen, emeritus professor of history at the University of Utah and best known for his work on native American and Mountain-west history, served as editor. Sterling M. McMurrin, E. E. Erickson Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, wrote a biographical essay on Roberts. Neither he nor Cooley, as has been alleged, edited the volume.

In addition to the three manuscripts Roberts wrote during the 1920s, Madsen included a series of documents selected to put the essays into context. Roberts prepared the first of the essays entitled "Book of Mormon Difficulties: A Study," during November and December 1921 in answer to five questions raised by a Mr. Couch of Washington, D. C., on the relationship between the culture of the pre-Columbian Americans as described in the Book of Mormon and in scientific investigations. These included: languages, animals, use of steel by pre-exilic Israelites, types of weapons, and presence of silk.

Roberts divided "Difficulties" into three parts: (1) linguistics, (2) physical culture, and (3) racial origins. In each section, he reviewed the work of authorities known to him, argued the case, concluded that the evidence from non-Mormon sources was against the Book of Mormon account, then raised a number of questions about the course of action to take (pp. 91-94, 114-15, 142-43).

Roberts presented "Difficulties" to the Church leadership in January 1922. Though no one in the First Presidency or Twelve could answer the questions he raised, a number reaffirmed their testimonies of the Book of Mormon; and Elder Richard R. Lyman suggested that they drop the matter. Instead, President Heber J. Grant appointed a committee consisting of President Anthony W. Ivins and Elders James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, and Roberts to investigate questions relating to the Book of Mormon.

With that mandate, Roberts took two courses of action. He met with the mem-

bers of the committee on several occasions during the late winter and spring of 1922, and he undertook research on both the source of the Book of Mormon text and its context. The result, "A Book of Mormon Study," was a report discussing problems Roberts saw on the basis of currently available research into American antiquities.

The "Study" addressed essentially three questions. First, Roberts asked, was literature available in early nineteenth-century America which might have served as a "ground plan" which Joseph Smith could have used for the Book of Mormon? Second, he queried, did the Prophet have a sufficiently creative imagination to have accomplished such a work? Third, were cultural traits revealed in the Book of Mormon also present in early nineteenth-century America?

His analysis and synthesis suggested affirmative answers to all three questions. There was, Roberts summarized, sufficient "common knowledge" of accepted American antiquities of the times, supplemented by such a work as Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, . . . [to have made] it possible for him [Joseph Smith] to create a book such as the Book of Mormon." Furthermore, "there can be no doubt as to the possession of vividly strong, creative imagination by Joseph Smith the Prophet" (p. 250). It is possible that the section on nineteenth-century religious culture was not completed since, unlike the other sections, there is no concluding statement (p. 316).

The final manuscript reproduced in the book — entitled "A Parallel" — accompanied a letter sent to Richard R. Lyman in October 1927 after Roberts had returned from his mission in New York. It consists of the juxtaposition of statements and quotations drawn from the Book of Mormon and *View of the Hebrews* showing similar information in both books.

The publication of this book evoked a decided controversy in some circles within the LDS scholarly community. John W. Welch, professor of law at Brigham Young University, reviewed the book negatively

for the *Church News* (15 Dec. 1985); he published "B. H. Roberts: Seeker after Truth," in the March 1986 *Ensign*; and he and Truman G. Madsen, Richard L. Evans Professor of Christian Understanding at Brigham Young University, published preliminary reports under the general title: "Did B. H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon?" (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1985); and Welch wrote: "Finding Answers to B. H. Roberts Questions and 'An Unparallel'" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985).

"Finding Answers to B. H. Roberts Questions and 'An Unparallel'" is a fairly straightforward attempt to deal with Roberts's questions by citing recent scholarship which supports the traditional LDS position and by reanalyzing the parallels between the Book of Mormon and *View of the Hebrews*. Welch concluded that both a different reading of the Ethan Smith book and recent evidence for the Book of Mormon as an ancient text would have let Roberts answer many of his questions differently. He pointed out particularly that most of *View of the Hebrews* is quite unlike the Book of Mormon.

Much of the controversy surrounding the book has been quite unfortunate. The tone of the first part of "Did B. H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon?", though decidedly negative, nevertheless raised some valid questions about the editorial method, the assumed chronology of Roberts's work, and the inclusion or exclusion of data and editorial comments. Less happily, parts 2 and 3 degenerated into an attack on McMurrin and Brigham Madsen.

The B. H. Roberts Society tried to get the four principals to discuss their differences. When that failed, Brigham Madsen and McMurrin counterattacked at the Algie Ballif Forum in Provo in March 1986 (Brigham D. Madsen and Sterling M. McMurrin, "Reply to John W. Welch and Truman G. Madsen," typescript, March 1986). In it, they vigorously took on the objections that the two BYU professors had

raised. Following the Ballif Forum presentation, Welch wrote evenhanded letters to Madsen and McMurrin to clarify his views and reduce the level of tension while spelling out his differences with them.

While Roberts's manuscripts are extremely interesting since they provide insights into his thought and assessment of the status of scholarship on the Book of Mormon during the early 1920s, from a historian's point of view they present some methodological problems. Since "Difficulties" is a survey of the literature on the questions asked, its conclusions for Roberts's time could simply be no better than the available scholarship. Roberts seems to have recognized this, but the Church leadership had no way to address the scholarly conclusions at the time. The Ivins committee might have helped, but Roberts was apparently dissatisfied with their initial efforts.

The major problem with the "Study" is that, if one takes it as anything more than an analysis of possibilities, it must be viewed as an example of the genetic fallacy (that something can be explained solely by its cultural context). Roberts tried to address that difficulty by assuming "that it is more than likely that the Smith family possessed a copy" of *View of the Hebrews* and by pointing out that the idea that the Indians were of Hebraic descent was popularly current in Western New York and New England during the early nineteenth century (pp. 151-61; quotation from p. 155). As Fawn Brodie has said, "It may never be proved that Joseph saw *View of the Hebrews* before writing the Book of Mormon." She, however, lapses into the genetic fallacy by continuing, "but the striking parallelisms between the two books hardly leave a case for mere coincidence," apparently on the assumption that the parallels were so strong that the case for coincidence collapsed (p. 29; Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2d ed. [New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977], p. 47).

"A Parallel," unless it too is taken as a statement of possibilities, can be viewed as an example of the fallacy of composition (reasoning from some features of the parts to generalize about the whole). As Welch has shown, there are sufficient differences in the context and evidence Ethan Smith included in *View of the Hebrews* to lead reasonable persons to disagree with the proposition that it could have served as the "ground plan" for the Book of Mormon.

At least two other questions of interest were raised in the controversy over the book. The first has to do with whether B. H. Roberts retained his testimony of the Book of Mormon after completing these studies. Brigham Madsen argued that "the record is mixed" (p. 29). Pointing to some questions raised in private conversations, he nevertheless indicated that in Roberts's "public statements he was still the defender of the faith." He then provided a number of quotations supporting this position (pp. 29-30). Sterling McMurrin also concluded that Roberts "continued to profess his faith in the authenticity of the book" (p. xviii).

Roberts's private statements raise some questions about his views. Brigham Madsen cited a long quotation from the diary of Wesley P. Lloyd, former dean of the Graduate School at BYU, reporting a conversation with Roberts late in his life which indicates that Roberts may have entertained the possibility of a psychological interpretation of the Book of Mormon. Welch cited discrepancies in Lloyd's diary entry and conflicting statements Roberts is reported to have made to others. However, historians have long come to expect inconsistencies and mistakes in details, even from those written close to events. Such discrepancies do not invalidate general impressions conveyed by such a diary. Nevertheless, the diary may warrant some additional study, since research by Welch has shown that the extant version of the diary was apparently in Lloyd's wife's hand rather than in his. Thus, it is not clear when the entry was made.

On balance, the question of whether Roberts expressed views in private conversation with friends that the Book of Mormon might be theologically true yet not historically true may never be conclusively answered. All four disputants conclude that until his death he actively witnessed for the authenticity of Joseph Smith's mission and for the Book of Mormon. His views did not impair his functioning as a General Authority nor his witnessing for the gospel.

A second question has to do with the editorial method used in the book. The method used, that of treating the three studies as finished manuscripts and publishing them in that form, is a valid one. It was thus properly used by Brigham Madsen in this book.

In view of some problems in the manuscripts, however, and the fact that others worked on revisions of the manuscripts, my own preference would have been to have seen the manuscript reproduced using the method of the various letterpress editions of papers of presidents of the United States. Since I served for a year as assistant editor for the *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* the method is quite familiar to me.

Such works use various conventions to allow the reader to understand the manuscript both as it originally stood and as the author and others edited it. For instance, editors reproduce crossed-out passages as words with dashes through them. This would have helped particularly in clearing up the matter of the use of the second edition of *View of the Hebrews*. Welch's research indicated that when Roberts had the study typed in 1922, he did not know the date of the first edition, and he made certain changes after his work in New York revealed that information. To place the "Parallel" in context, more evidence should have been cited on the amount of work Roberts did on the topic in the period between 1922 when the "Study" was typed and 1927 when he gave Lyman the "Par-

allel." Welch's research suggests that it was, in fact, very little. Brigham Madsen's reply cites evidence that it was a great deal more. The reader has a right to the evidence on this question.

It is the role of the editor to place the documents in context, to identify persons, places, and events mentioned in the text, and to help the reader understand the state of mind of the author of the manuscript. Welch argues that Brigham Madsen should have supplied information on the current best answers to such problems. I disagree. It would be unnecessarily pedantic to present everything relevant to the topics under consideration published after Roberts completed his work unless they helped clarify the context in which Roberts wrote.

Thus, while the editorial work exhibits minor problems, it is generally well done. The introduction places the manuscripts in context. The other documents reproduced, with few exceptions like the letter to Richard Lyman and the long quotation from the Lloyd diary, are drawn from 1921 and 1922 when the first two manuscripts were written. People and places are sufficiently well identified as are the works Roberts used in his studies.

On the whole, the publication of this book is a valuable addition to the literature of Mormonism in the 1920s. Brigham D. Madsen is to be congratulated for the time and effort he put into the volume. The University of Illinois Press should be praised for its willingness to publish the volume. Everett Cooley and George Smith deserve credit for their support. In addition, Jack Welch should also receive credit for clarifying important points on the text of the manuscript and for raising questions on Roberts's state of mind. Scholars in the field of Mormon studies will benefit immeasurably from having this volume, the assessments of the editor, and the letters connected with manuscripts in a readily available form.