

B. H. Roberts's Studies of the Book of Mormon

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WHEN I AGREED TO EDIT THE WORK *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon*, it was my intention to follow as faithfully as possible the explicit duty of any editor—to prepare the literary work of another person for publication—by selecting and arranging the material, by placing it in perspective through an introduction, and by adding explanatory notes as necessary.

In addition, because of the sensitive nature of the subject, I promised myself not to inject any personal judgments or conclusions but to allow the reader to make his or her own assessment of what B. H. Roberts presents. I tended to lean over backwards to achieve that goal as my final statement in the introduction attests, "Whether or not Roberts retained his belief in the Book of Mormon may never be determined." As an indication of the apparent impossibility of absolute certainty about his convictions, that conclusion still stands, but there is nevertheless room for strong opinion based on Roberts's own decisive declarations.

I would now like to consider the subject of Roberts's beliefs as contained in his *Studies*, not as an editor but as any other reader of the volume and will feel free to offer my personal evaluation of it, hopefully in English as plain and understandable as that employed by Roberts himself.

Since publication of *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon* there seems to be mounting concern on the part of some people about the message imparted in these documents and about Roberts himself.¹

Let us first examine the Roberts record by going back to the circumstances surrounding the writing of the biography of Roberts, *Defender of the Faith*, by Brigham Young University religion professor Truman G.

1. *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon*, edited by Brigham D. Madsen, with an introduction by Sterling M. McMurrin, was first published in 1985 by the University of Illinois Press in Urbana. Seven years later it was issued in a second, revised and corrected, edition by Signature Books of Salt Lake City.

Madsen.² According to the authors of *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith*, publication of Roberts's life story was held up for fifteen years by school trustees and was finally authorized only "with the understanding that it would be cleared with the publications committee of the Church before actually being published."³ And when it was "cleared," the book contained not a whisper of Roberts's controversial "Study of the Book of Mormon," although Madsen was aware of the study as evidenced by his discussion of it in an article in the 1979 summer issue of *Brigham Young University Studies*, one year before his Roberts biography appeared.⁴

The next episode in the saga of apparent opposition to the Roberts work came when the FARMS organization (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies), headquartered at BYU, began selling a criticism of my editing of the book. Entitled "Did B. H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon?" it attempted to discredit Sterling M. McMurrin, who wrote an introductory biographical essay, and me, as well as B. H. Roberts in the process. In addition, one could also purchase a fifty-nine-page monograph entitled "Finding Answers to B. H. Roberts' Questions and an 'Unparallel,'" and a document entitled "B. H. Roberts, His Final Decade: Statements about the Book of Mormon (1922-33)." One might well ask at this point, why the concern about Roberts and his last analysis of the origins of the Book of Mormon?

Finally the *Deseret News* of 15 December 1985 printed an article summarizing the FARMS arguments against Dr. McMurrin and myself under the title, "New B. H. Roberts book lacks insight of his testimony." It is noteworthy that this review appeared not in the "Book Review" section but in the "Church News" section where it rightly belonged. To ensure that all interested people would get the appropriate picture of Roberts's examination of the Book of Mormon, the *Ensign* magazine, the official periodical of the LDS church, also published a six-page article about the Roberts book under the title, "B. H. Roberts, Seeker After Truth."⁵

In the wake of all this publicity, we were left wondering if it was possible these reflections on the supposed defects in our scholarship were an attempt to divert attention from Roberts's conclusions about the origin of the Book of Mormon by censuring the messengers who seemed to be the bearers of bad news. As far as we were concerned, we were willing to

2. Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980).

3. Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 73.

4. Truman G. Madsen, "B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon," *Brigham Young University Studies* 19 (Summer 1979): 427-45.

5. John W. Welch, "B. H. Roberts, Seeker After Truth," *Ensign* 16 (Mar. 1986): 56-62.

accept reviewer Richard Sherlock's evaluation that the *Studies* book was "finely edited."⁶

There seemed to be growing apprehension about that now dangerous historian, B. H. Roberts. This unexpected attention apparently only attracted more readers of the Roberts tome as indicated by the Salt Lake City Zion's Book Store ten best sellers list of LDS books in which the *Studies* was number one during late 1985. As reviewer Sherlock wrote, "This book will be the one that is read in a hundred years."⁷

Who was Brigham Henry Roberts that he should be arousing so much attention over a half century after his death? As *Defender of the Faith*, or more appropriately "Defender of the Book of Mormon," Roberts spent a lifetime in justifying his belief in the Nephite record. His first serious effort to defend the Mormon scripture came in 1881 when as a twenty-three-year-old missionary in Tennessee, he met and vanquished in public debate a Campbellite minister who had challenged the Book of Mormon as being a fraud.⁸

Roberts's many years of defending in public disputation and in written argument his steadfast belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon culminated in 1909 with the publication of his *New Witnesses for God*.⁹ In this work Roberts vigorously defended the Mormon scripture by examining the external evidence to support the book—the testimony of witnesses, ancient ruins, and the customs and traditions of the American native races. He acknowledged that he had not met all objections to the book but was satisfied that more time and research in American antiquities would vindicate his efforts. Such scholarly activity in behalf of his church and his outstanding proselytizing had already brought him early prominence in 1888 when he was sustained as a member of the First Council of Seventy at the age of thirty-one. His six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* may still be the best detailed history of the church for the nineteenth century.

As explained in the introduction and in the correspondence included in *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon*, Roberts became involved in a second major examination of the Nephite record in the 1920s as a result of the referral to him of five questions about the book proposed by an investigator named Couch from Washington, D.C. Prompted by these queries and no longer satisfied with his answers in *New Witnesses for God*, he engaged in a 141-page investigation of "Book of Mormon Difficulties."

Although the questions of Couch had been directed to Apostle James E. Talmage, they were immediately referred to Roberts as the general

6. Richard Sherlock, review in *The Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (Jan. 1987): 72.

7. *Ibid.*, 71.

8. *B. H. Roberts Studies*, 2.

9. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909).

authority most capable of answering them. In a short letter Roberts was able to provide explanations to Couch in reply to most of the inquiries. But one question seemed unanswerable: why were there no horses in America upon the arrival of the Spaniards when the followers of Lehi had such animals?

Not satisfied with his brief replies to the Couch questions, he prepared the more detailed analysis of 141 typed pages which he submitted to President Heber J. Grant and counselors, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and his own Council of Seventy in January 1922. This document, "Book of Mormon Difficulties: A Study," is the first of the three documents presented in our book.

In three days of meetings with the general authorities of his church, 4, 5, and 26 January, Roberts was allowed to present his "Difficulties" paper to them with a full discussion of the problems he had encountered with the historicity of the Book of Mormon. He wrote to President Heber J. Grant that his hope was that "from the collective wisdom of all the brethren addressed, or from the inspiration of the Lord . . . we might find a solution of the problems presented. . . ."¹⁰ After the first two days, he was so disappointed with the results of his meeting with church leaders that he wrote Grant again, "There was so much said that was utterly irrelevant, and so little said, if anything at all, that was helpful in the matters at issue that I came away from the conference quite disappointed."¹¹ The third day of meetings granted Roberts by President Grant evidently was just as dissatisfying in providing answers.

We get a more detailed picture of what transpired in those three days of special meetings from an entry in the personal diary of Wesley P. Lloyd, who had a three and a half hour very frank interview with B. H. Roberts about six weeks before Roberts's death in 1933. Lloyd had been a missionary under Roberts and later in his life became dean of the graduate school at Brigham Young University. Lloyd recorded Roberts's remembrance of the reaction of the church leaders to his presentation, "In answer, they merely one by one stood up and bore testimony to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. George Albert Smith [later President of his church], in tears, testified that his faith in the Book had not been shaken by the question."¹²

Quite frustrated by his unsatisfying meetings with his brethren in the church hierarchy, Roberts spent the winter and spring of 1922 researching and writing the more important "A Book of Mormon Study," which takes up 166 printed pages of our book. In it he examined the following subjects:

10. B. H. Roberts *Studies*, 46.

11. *Ibid.*, 47.

12. *Ibid.*, 23.

(1) a consideration that Ethan Smith's book, *View of the Hebrews*, published in 1823 seven years before the Book of Mormon appeared, could have served as the structural basis or ground plan for Joseph Smith which would have enabled him to write the Book of Mormon; (2) evidence that the imaginative mind of Joseph Smith gave him the ability to write such a book and without any gold plates being available; (3) internal evidence that the Book of Mormon was of human origin; and (4) the similarity of conversions of the period when and where the Book of Mormon was "translated" and published. A third Roberts document included in this book is a comparison in side-by-side columns on each page of eighteen "Parallels" between the Book of Mormon and *View of the Hebrews*.

The *Ensign* article argued that Joseph Smith could not have used Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* as the basis for writing the Book of Mormon because the parallels between the two books are not exact. For example, the reviewer pointed out that Ethan Smith had the Ten Tribes come to America across the Bering Strait, while Joseph Smith's Nephites crossed the Pacific Ocean. In another example, Ethan Smith maintained that the legendary Quetzalcoatl was Moses, while Joseph Smith held him to be Jesus. But a careful reading of "A Book of Mormon Study" shows that Roberts asserted only that Joseph Smith could have used *View of the Hebrews* as a general "ground plan" for establishing a plot for the Book of Mormon, recognizing that an exact duplication of the facts from one book to the other would have led to an instant declaration of plagiarism against Joseph Smith by his detractors. The Mormon leader would have had to disguise the close connection between the two books by changing some of the specific incidents and stories related.

Although the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints also bases its beliefs on the Joseph Smith story and the Book of Mormon, its response to the publication of *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon* was much different from that of the Salt Lake City church. While the latter adopted a very defensive posture both in the *Deseret News* and *Ensign* magazine in criticism of *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon*, RLDS church member William D. Russell of Graceland College expounded the different approach of his church to the Book of Mormon in his review of Roberts's *Studies* for the *Utah Historical Quarterly*. It is instructive to recite a portion of Russell's comments:

Faced with Roberts's collection of evidence that undermined the traditional Mormon claims about the Book of Mormon, church leaders could have decided to begin revising the church's position on the Book of Mormon or they could have left it to individual members to decide for themselves on what level the Book of Mormon is "true." There are, after all, alternatives other than the polar positions (either the book is precisely what Joseph Smith claimed it to be or it is a hoax). It might be a history of

ancient America that was also influenced by Joseph's religious and cultural heritage as he translated it. Or it might contain doctrinal "truth" set in the framework of a story about ancient Americans. It is not surprising, though, that the general authorities responded to Roberts's research by ignoring the issues he raised and reaffirming their testimonies of the Book of Mormon. Quite likely the general authorities of today would respond in the same way. Indeed, affirming the Book of Mormon as history seems to be given an important emphasis by them, perhaps because of an awareness that some Mormons no longer accept it as history.

Had RLDS leaders in Missouri been confronted with studies such as Roberts's in the 1920s they no doubt would have reacted similarly. They did confront the question in the 1960s, however, when certain intellectuals within the church raised the same kinds of issues that Roberts's three studies discuss. In 1962 RLDS church statistician James E. Lancaster published in the November 15 issue of the *Saints' Herald* a study of the method of translation of the Book of Mormon. In one of the most controversial articles ever published in the church's official periodical, Lancaster argued, similarly to Roberts, that Joseph translated the work by gazing into a peepstone buried in a hat, with the plates on a table under a cloth. Later in the 1960s Wayne Ham of the church's Religious Education Department wrote a summary of Book of Mormon problems, intended only for private discussion among church leaders, much like Roberts's studies. But copies were leaked, and when fundamentalists photocopied and widely distributed this essay and other similar papers written in the department, Ham published his essay in the September 1970 issue of *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action*. Other RLDS members also advocated revisionist views of the Book of Mormon, which were summarized by this author in the September 1982 *Sunstone*. As a result of public and private discussion, church leaders have followed Ham's advice and have soft-pedalled the Book of Mormon in church curricula and publications.¹³

After his 1922 January meeting with his colleagues in the church hierarchy, Roberts gave up trying to get any answers from them concerning the "problems" of the Book of Mormon, writing later that the church leaders were not in a "studious mood."¹⁴ Accepting an assignment as president of the Eastern States Mission, he spent the next five years in New York and New England. During this mission period and the six years after, from 1927 until his death in 1933, he could have at any time destroyed the studies which he had produced. That he did not do so and that his descendants did

13. William D. Russell, review, *Utah Historical Quarterly* 55 (Fall 1987): 376. The John Whitmer Historical Association, with connections to the RLDS church, awarded the editor of *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon* a "Special Citation" as the author of the "Best Book" of that year in the field of Mormon studies.

14. *B. H. Roberts Studies*, 346.

not do so but eventually gave them to the University of Utah for publication is an indication that he at least considered the possibility that they might eventually be made public.

The important question about Roberts concerns whether he retained his belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon as a result of his investigations in the 1920s of the origins of the work. A compilation by FARMS of nearly all of Roberts's conference sermons and public statements from 1922 to his death in 1933 attempts to demonstrate that he kept his faith in the Mormon scripture. His conference address of April 1929 has been advanced as one of the most striking of Roberts's statements in behalf of the Book of Mormon. An interesting thing about the sermon is its emphasis on the Doctrine and Covenants with only incidental mention of the importance of the Book of Mormon and that it was a product of inspiration. In fact in reviewing all of the Roberts's sermons and public statements during the last decade before his death, one is struck by the preponderance of emphasis on the ethical teachings and aphorisms in the Book of Mormon as compared with statements concerned with historical events. The latter are there but not with the specificity with which Roberts discusses such incidents in his "A Book of Mormon Study."

Is it possible then that Roberts could leave the impression in his public statements that he still retained his belief in the Book of Mormon while privately harboring the conviction that it was a product of Joseph Smith's very retentive memory and fertile imagination? Other people seem to be able to thus carry water on both shoulders. If belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon is the litmus test of orthodoxy, there may be a few and perhaps more than a few active but unorthodox Mormons who are followers of B. H. Roberts at heart.

Finally let us examine Roberts's statements in his *Studies* to determine his true feelings about the Book of Mormon. Some critics of his work maintain that Roberts was playing the Devil's Advocate in raising questions about the book or that he only rarely came to any conclusions about it. A few examples can effectively destroy these contentions.

In item number 9 of his "A Parallel," Roberts first quoted from Ethan Smith's book, *View of the Hebrews*, concerning how the peoples of the Americas eventually divided into two groups, one barbarous and the other civilized:

It is highly probable that the more civilized part of the tribes of Israel after they settled in America become wholly separated from the hunting and savage tribes of their brethren; that the latter lost the knowledge of their having descended from the same family with themselves; that the more civilized part continued for many centuries, that tremendous wars were frequent between them and their savage brethren until the former became extinct. . . . These partially

*civilized people became extinct and what account can be given of this, but that the savages extirpated them after long and dismal wars?*¹⁵

After thus citing *View of the Hebrews*, Roberts then described how the Book of Mormon peoples finally divided into the Nephites, a group faithful to the Lord, and the Lamanites, savage tribes who "loved murder and did drink the blood of beasts." Over many years these two forces engaged in a series of wars until finally, as Roberts wrote, "about 400 AD. the Lamanites entirely destroyed the Nephites at Cumorah, where dreadful battles were fought, where no quarter was asked or given between the parties."¹⁶ Then Roberts quoted from the Book of Mormon (Mormon 8:2), "Now it came to pass that after the great tremendous battles of Cumorah behold the Nephites who had escaped into the country southward were hunted by the Lamanites *until they were all destroyed.*"¹⁷ In this specific parallel Roberts thus suggests how Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* could have been used by Joseph Smith as a "ground plan" for the narrative of the Nephite-Lamanite wars leading to the destruction of the Nephites.

In his "A Book of Mormon Study," Roberts also offered his evaluation of the Nephite-Jaredite wars of extinction which occurred one thousand years before those recounted above. There was one difference between the two stories, according to Roberts, "In all this war of extinction, and destruction there is only one important variation, and that is that in the case of the Jaredites, the annihilation was complete for both sides down to the last man; in the case of the Nephites and Lamanites, only the Nephites were wholly annihilated; the Lamanites; their opponents, survived but only in a state of anarchy leading ultimately to the barbarism and semi-barbarism in which they were found by the Europeans a thousand years afterward."¹⁸

In his summation of the Jaredite story, Roberts asked:

And now, I doubt not, at the conclusion of this review of the Nephites and Jaredite wars of extinction, some will be led to exclaim—and I will set it down for them—"Is all this sober history inspired written and true, representing things that actually happened? Or is it a wonder-tale of an immature mind, unconscious of what a test he is laying on human credulity when asking men to accept his narrative as solemn history?"¹⁹

15. *Ibid.*, 332.

16. *Ibid.*, 332, 334.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 283.

19. *Ibid.*

In another searching look at the Jaredite colony, Roberts examined their sea voyage to America, accomplished in eight small barges each the length of a tree and with a small hole cut in the top and bottom of each vessel allowing either aperture to be opened to admit air. Roberts wrote that the "Jaredite barges had neither sails nor means of steering, but evidently were to wallow their way through the sea, sometimes submerged and sometimes atop of the sea." The small ships carried flocks "male and female of every kind," "fowls of the air," "fish of the waters," and "seeds of every kind" plus enough feed and water to sustain these animals and the complement of about 100 Jaredite colonists. The trip across the ocean took 344 days, just 21 days short of a whole year. Roberts concluded his account of this extraordinary passage by asking, "Do we have here a great historical document, or only a wonder tale, told by an undeveloped mind, living in a period and in an environment where the miraculous in 'history' is accepted without limitations and is supposed to account for all inconsistencies and lapses that challenge human credulity in the thought and in the easy philosophy *that all things are possible with God?*"²⁰

A final example—and in typical Roberts plain-spoken and straightforward English—is his description of the similarities in the stories of three anti-Christ: Sherem, Nehor, and Korihor.²¹ This time Roberts did not conclude by asking a searching question but declared forthrightly:

But in addition to the striking parallelism in these incidents of Anti-Christ of the Book of Mormon, with the strong implication that they have their origin in one mind, I call attention again to the fact of "rawness" in dealing with this question of unbelief, the evidence of "amateurishness" increasingly evident in this story of Korihor. Does it not carry with it proof that it is the work of a pious youth dealing with the very commonplace stock arguments clumsily put together for the belief in the existence of God . . . rather than an adult appeal and argument on the great questions involved? . . . And is not the vindication of God and his truth by a vindictive miracle on the person of the ranting blasphemer, rather the dream of a pious boy of what might very well have happened, rather than a matter of actual experience?

There were other Anti-Christ among the Nephites, . . . but I shall hold that what is presented illustrates . . . that they are all of one breed and brand; so nearly alike that one mind is the author of them, and that a young and undeveloped, but piously inclined mind. The evidence I sorrowfully submit, points to Joseph Smith as their creator. it is difficult to believe that they are the product of history, that they came upon the scene separated by long

20. *Ibid.*, 355-58.

21. *Ibid.*, 265-70.

periods of time, and among a race which was the ancestral race of the red man of America.²²

In this statement, it is evident that Roberts meant exactly what he said and that his judgment concerning the authorship of the Book of Mormon was crystal clear.

Consider that Wesley P. Lloyd only six weeks before the death of Roberts reported him saying "that the plates were not objective but subjective with Joseph Smith, that his exceptional imagination qualified him psychologically for the experience which he had in presenting to the world the Book of Mormon and that the plates with the Urim and Thummim were not objective."²³ In other words, and in the plain kind of language that Roberts liked to employ, there were no gold plates, there was only Joseph Smith drawing upon his creative imagination to formulate and write a work of fiction called the Book of Mormon. This preeminent Mormon intellectual and church authority was a conscientious scholar who was willing to follow wherever the evidence led him.

22. *Ibid.*, 271.

23. *Ibid.*, 23.