

Mr. Couch and Elder Roberts

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THE CONTROVERSIAL BOOK OF MORMON STUDIES Elder B. H. Roberts undertook in the early 1920s have been thoroughly treated in *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, edited by Brigham D. Madsen.¹ Roberts's work addressed, in part, questions about the Book of Mormon's historicity raised by a Mr. Couch of Washington, D.C.

Couch's questions were initially sent to Elder James E. Talmage with a cover letter dated 22 August 1921 from William E. Riter at the U.S. Experiment Station in Salina, Utah. That cover letter read: "During the past few years I have associated and had some religious discussions with some non-'Mormons.' Mr. Couch of Washington, D.C., has been studying the Book of Mormon and submits the enclosed questions concerning his studies. Would you kindly answer them and send them to me."² Talmage forwarded Couch's questions to Roberts shortly after they were received.

Specifically, Couch wanted to know the following:

1. The "Mormon" tradition states that the American Indians were the descendants of the Lamanites. The time allowed from the first landing of Lehi and his followers in America to the present is about 2,700 years. Philologic studies have divided the Indian languages into five distinct linguistic stocks which show very little relationship. It does not appear that this diversity in tongues could obtain if the Indians were the descendants of a people who possessed as highly developed a language as the ancient Hebrew, but indicates that the division of the Indians into separate stocks occurred long before their language was developed beyond the most primitive kind of articulations. Again the time allowed from the landing of Lehi is much too short to account for the observed diversity.

2. The Book of Mormon states that when the followers of Lehi reached

1. See Brigham H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brigham D. Madsen, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); the first edition was published in 1985 by the University of Illinois Press.

2. *Ibid.*, 32.

North America they found, among other animals, the horse here. Historical and paeleontological data shows that the horse was not in America at that time, nor did it arrive for 20 centuries afterward.

3. Nephi is stated to have had a bow of steel which he broke shortly after he had left Jerusalem, some 600 years B.C. There is no record that I know of which allows the Jews the knowledge of steel at such a period.

4. Reference is frequently made in the Book of Mormon to "swords and cimeters." The use of the word scimeter does not occur in other literature before the rise of the Mohammedan power and apparently that peculiar weapon was not developed until long after the Christian era. It does not, therefore appear likely that the Nephites or Lamanites possessed either the weapon or the term.

5. Reference is also made to the possession by the Nephites of an abundance of silk. As silk was not known in America at that time the question arises, where did they obtain the silk?³

Mormon attitudes on these issues were different in 1921 than they are today. For example, even though Couch's first question broached the diversity of languages, the implication concerning the origin of Native Americans was clear to Roberts,⁴ since he had previously thought that all Native Americans were descended from Book of Mormon peoples.⁵ In fact, at the time this view was almost universally accepted among Mormons.⁶ Joseph Smith had explained in 1842: "I was informed [by the Angel Moroni] concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country, who they were, and from whence they came; [was given] a brief sketch of their origin . . . [and told that] the remnants are the Indians that now inhabit this country."⁷

Today few Mormons hold such a view. Many now believe there were limited Book of Mormon locations or populations, or that contemporary Native Americans are of mixed blood from progenitors of various migra-

3. Ibid., 36.

4. See *ibid.*, 116-43, particularly 116, where Roberts acknowledges the implication.

5. See B. H. Roberts, "The Origins of the American Natives," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 50 (1888): 376-80.

6. See, for example, Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Joseph F. Smith, 1877) 18:166-67; Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Albert Carrington, 1881) 21:129-30; Erastus Snow, *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: John Henry Smith, 1883) 23:7; George Teasdale, *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: John Henry Smith, 1884) 25:18-19; and James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949), 55-56, and *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949), 290-91. For further discussion of this matter, see George D. Smith, "Is There Any Way to Escape These Difficulties?": The Book of Mormon Studies of B. H. Roberts," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Summer 1984): 104.

7. See James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1965), 1:136-42.

tions,⁸ perhaps via the Bering Straits.⁹ Roberts, in his answers to Couch, acknowledged that some Mormons were beginning to consider these possibilities.¹⁰

Brigham Madsen has suggested that Roberts's examination of these questions altered his views on the historicity of the Book of Mormon.¹¹ Others dispute that conclusion.¹² One thing is certain. Couch had considerable impact on Roberts. In addition, his questions anticipated modern Book of Mormon study on Native American ancestry, philology, domesticated animals, metallurgy, and textiles.¹³

Who was this Mr. Couch whose questions so intrigued B. H. Roberts? Using the District of Columbia Directory for 1921, Brigham Madsen offered five possible candidates: Arthur O. Couch, a U.S. treasury depart-

8. See, for example, Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 14. See also George D. Smith, "Orthodoxy and Encyclopedia," *Sunstone* 16 (Nov. 1993): 50-51, for a discussion of entries in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Archaeologists and scholars of related disciplines with LDS sympathies are less rigid. See Dee F. Green, "Book of Mormon Archaeology: The Myths and The Alternatives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Summer 1969): 78; John L. Sorenson, "Digging into the Book of Mormon: Our Changing Understanding of Ancient America and its Scripture," *Ensign* 14 (Sept. 1984): 29. Recent LDS general authorities have not discussed the matter. However, Elder John A. Widtsoe accepted the idea that American aborigines were not wholly of Hebrew blood. See Widtsoe and Franklin S. Harris, Jr., *Seven Claims of the Book of Mormon* (Independence, MO: Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., 1937), 15, 85-115. See also Anthony W. Ivins, in *LDS Conference Reports* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 1929), 15-16; Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, CA: Kolob Book Co., 1950): 14. See also Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 32-33.

9. That the Bering land bridge possibly served as a main route for immigration requires colonization sites in Beringia that predate lower latitude sites but that are related by artifact types. For a discussion of these matters, see, for example, John F. Hoffecker, W. Roger Powers, and Ted Goebel, "The Colonization of Beringia and the Peopling of the New World," *Science* 259 (1993): 46-53; Lisa Busch, "Alaska Sites Contend as Native Americans' First Stop," *Science* 264 (1994): 347. For a treatment of Bering migration that also mentions the Mormon point of view, see Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *The Indian Heritage of America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 36-46.

10. See *Studies*, 54.

11. See *ibid.*, 22-24, 142-43. See also Smith, "Is There Any Way to Escape These Difficulties?" 94-111; Brigham D. Madsen, "B. H. Roberts's *Studies of the Book of Mormon*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Fall 1993): 77-86.

12. See Truman G. Madsen, "B. H. Roberts After Fifty Years," *Ensign* 13 (Dec. 1983): 13-15; John W. Welch, "B. H. Roberts Seeker After Truth," *Ensign* 16 (Mar. 1986): 58-60. See also Thomas G. Alexander, "B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Winter 1986): 190-93, for an evenhanded review of the controversy.

13. A few examples include Sidney B. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 147-65; John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992); Smith, "Orthodoxy and Encyclopedia," 51-52; Green, "Book of Mormon Archaeology," 71-80; and Sorenson, "Digging into the Book of Mormon," 27-37.

ment auditor; Frank B. Couch, a district inspector; James F. Couch, a Department of Agriculture chemist; John J. Couch, a laboratory technician; and Ralph F. Couch, a newspaper correspondent.¹⁴ Was Mr. Couch one of these five men?

Direct evidence on this point is speculative except for Riter's 22 August 1921 letter, which said simply, "Mr. Couch of Washington D.C. has been studying the Book of Mormon and submits the enclosed questions." Apparently Roberts knew nothing of Couch's identity not found in Couch's questions or in Riter's cover letter. Nothing identifies Couch further in subsequent correspondence between Riter and Roberts,¹⁵ nor in the famous Wesley P. Lloyd diary entry on the Couch/Roberts matter.¹⁶ Fortunately, the circumstances surrounding Riter's employment allow us to determine Couch's identity: the chemist James Fitton Couch.

Long before I read Couch's questions, I became acquainted with the professional work of James Fitton Couch in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). I filled the same position in the USDA which he had occupied several decades earlier. We both were chemists in USDA poisonous plant research investigations.

The USDA has conducted research on poisonous plants for about one hundred years.¹⁷ For over two decades beginning about 1915, much of the work during the summer months was conducted at the U.S. Experiment Station in Gooseberry Canyon near Salina, Utah, with fall, winter, and spring activities in Washington, D.C. James F. Couch was one of three principal USDA scientists from Washington, D.C., working summers at the Salina Station during that period. The others were C. D. Marsh and A. B. Clawson.¹⁸ Among Utahns employed to assist in the summer work was William Emerson Riter, at that time a student at Utah State Agricultural College (USAC) in Logan, from which he graduated with a B.S. degree in botany in 1922.¹⁹

Both James F. Couch and William E. Riter were at the Salina Station in

14. See *Studies*, 37n3.

15. See *ibid.*, 45-46, 51-56, 56-57.

16. See photocopy of Wesley P. Lloyd diary entry (exhibit 10) in Truman G. Madsen and John W. Welch, *Did B.H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon?* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985).

17. John M. Kingsbury, *Poisonous Plants of United States and Canada* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), 11-12; Richard F. Keeler, "Toxins and Teratogens of Higher Plants," *Lloydia* 38 (1975): 57-60.

18. From the general correspondence, photographic, plant collection, and other records of the U.S. Experiment Station at Salina, Utah. Extant records are now housed at the USDA Poisonous Plant Research Laboratory, Logan, Utah.

19. For information on Riter's college activities, see the Utah State Agricultural College yearbooks, the *Buzzer*, for the years 1919-22. Riter was an A student much involved in botany and agricultural extracurricular activities.

August 1921, according to USDA poisonous plant research records. Records of August collections from that location's plant collection record book include some observations made by Riter about the time Couch's questions were sent to James E. Talmage at LDS headquarters. A group photograph taken 5 August 1921 at the Salina Station includes James F. Couch, then age thirty-three, and William E. Riter, twenty.

Phrases in two of Riter's letters point to James F. Couch. In his letter of 22 August 1921, transmitting Couch's questions to Salt Lake City, he refers to "Mr. Couch of Washington" (emphasis added). The Washingtonian James F. Couch was with Riter at that time at the Salina Station. By contrast, in his letter to Roberts the following 27 February, Riter says, "Mr. Couch at Washington" (emphasis added). James F. Couch had by that time returned to Washington headquarters for winter activities, as was the custom.

Consistent with the conclusion that the Mr. Couch who asked the questions was trained in science, as was James F. Couch, is the appearance in his questions of phrases typical of scientists. For example, Mr. Couch used the words "which show" for "which have" and "could obtain" for "could result." He used the phrases "data shows," as do people accustomed to dealing with data, and "no record which allows . . . the knowledge" meaning no evidence to support it. Scientists sometimes use his phrase "appears likely" to hedge in answering questions, and his use of "question arises" commonly means "Okay, let's see the evidence." Other professions use such phrases to some extent, but they are so common among chemists that for me Couch's questions smell like a chemistry laboratory.

James F. Couch was a scholarly man. His achievements show him to have possessed a keen intellect and an analytical mind—one who might be expected to ask thought-provoking questions about the Book of Mormon. He served for three decades as a chemist for the USDA in the Bureau of Animal Industries in Washington, D.C. He investigated poisonous plants in the 1920s and 1930s and worked later as a chemist in analytical and physical chemistry investigations at the USDA Eastern Regional Research Laboratory in Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania.²⁰

Born in 1888 in Somerville, Massachusetts, to J. D. Couch and Ellen M. Cary, James Fitton Couch attended Harvard, where he obtained an A.B. degree in 1913. He then served as an industrial chemist from 1913 to 1917, at which time he became employed by the USDA. During his long

20. *Miscellaneous Publications* series of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office). Numbers 5, 32, 63, 123, 176, 232, 304, 376, 431, and 640 covering the period up to 1947 show that Couch was a USDA employee with the Bureau of Animal Industry until 1939 at which time he is shown to be located at the Eastern Regional Research Laboratory of USDA.

career with USDA, he held joint appointments as an instructor in chemistry at George Washington University, 1919-20, and later as a professor of biology at National University. Meanwhile he found time to complete both an A.M. (1923) and a Ph.D. (1926) at American University.²¹

By the end of his career, James F. Couch was senior author of about 90 scientific papers and coauthor of many others, including some on critical analysis of certain chemical techniques and applications.²² He wrote a book on chemical terminology.²³ But most of his research centered on the chemistry of poisonous plants, identification of their toxins, structural elucidation of those toxins where necessary, and assessment of their toxicities. One might think of that study as a form of detective work. Couch had a critical frame of mind and certainly could critically review a book at age thirty-three.

Couch's papers were numerous and of high quality. Although his work was published mainly in the 1920s and 1930s, reviews and monographs still cite his research on poisonous plants in general as well as on several specific areas, notably lupin alkaloids.²⁴ In fact, a review of the relevant literature shows that from 1975 to 1992 his work was cited an average of five times per year.²⁵ That frequency demonstrates a remarkable record half a century later for a highly specific scientific niche. Couch served for a time as president of the Chemical Society of Washington, probably based in part on that enviable publication record.²⁶

The circumstantial evidence indicates that it was James Fitton Couch who drafted the questions that so interested B. H. Roberts. In a sense Couch's questions became the stimulus for perhaps the most friendly, in-depth, in-house, critical examination of Mormon scripture by an LDS general authority ever undertaken. If Roberts's studies are ever officially

21. Biographical information from L. H. Bailey and Ethel Zoe Bailey, comps., *RUS-A Biographical Register of Rural Leadership in the United States and Canada* (Ithaca, NY: the compilers, 1930), 157.

22. See *Chemical Abstract Indexes of the Abstract*, vols. 11-46, for Couch's senior authored citations. Most of his coauthored papers were in *Abstract Volumes* for subsequent years.

23. James Fitton Couch, *Dictionary of Chemical Terms* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1920).

24. Nelson J. Leonard, "Lupin Alkaloids," in *The Alkaloids*, Vol. 3, ed. R. H. F. Manske and H. L. Holmes (New York: Academic Press, 1953), 119-95; Kingsbury, *Poisonous Plants of United States and Canada*, 525-26; James A. Mears and Tom J. Mabry, "Alkaloids in the Leguminosae," in *Chemotaxonomy of the Leguminosae*, ed. J. B. Harborne, D. Boulter, and B. L. Turner (New York: Academic Press, 1971), 73-172; Stanislaus J. Smolenski, A. Douglas Kinghorn, and Manuel F. Balandrin, "Toxic Constituents of Legume Forage Plants," *Economic Botany* 35 (1981): 321-55; Richard F. Keeler, "Quinolizidine Alkaloids in Range and Grain Lupins," in *Toxicants of Plant Origin*, Vol. 1, ed. Peter R. Cheeke (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 1989), 133-67.

25. See *Science Citation Indexes* (1975-92) under citations for J. F. Couch.

26. See the following for Couch's Chemical Society of Washington outgoing presidential address: James Fitton Couch, "The Chemistry of Stock-Poisoning Plants," *Journal of Chemical Education* 14 (1937): 16-30.

used to help provide answers to such troublesome questions, the important role played by the chemist and scholarly reader of the Book of Mormon, James Fitton Couch, should be widely acknowledged.