

Reflections on LDS Disbelief in the Book of Mormon as History

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DURING THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, not too many members left their faith or were excommunicated for disbelief in the Book of Mormon. In the first somewhat chaotic years, while Joseph Smith experimented with theology and organization, a few of his followers left the infant church over disputes in leadership, deep concern with the practice of polygamy, discouragement in the face of persecution and physical hardship, or other dissatisfactions which normally can occur in any new religion. Archaeology and the other disciplines concerned with the origins of the natives Columbus found in the New World were not well advanced, and accounts of the few discoveries of ancient ruins were not widely circulated or readily available to early Mormons caught up in the struggle to establish their church on the American frontier. The hardships encountered in crossing the plains and establishing Zion in the desert Great Basin, plus the long fight with the United States government over polygamy, left little time for scientific investigations of the historicity of their Book of Mormon.

From the late 1800s into the early twentieth century, the chief defender of the new sacred document was historian Brigham H. Roberts, a member of the Council of Seventy and a vigorous and combative protagonist against anyone who cast doubts about the book's authenticity. In his first years Roberts spent most of his time advancing biblical and scriptural proofs to sustain the veracity of the Book of Mormon, but after the turn of the century he decided to examine the latest scientific archaeological discoveries which might support his thesis. The result was his three-volume work, *New Witnesses for God*, published in 1909, an intensive analysis, in volumes II and III, of scientific evidence which would corroborate the ancient record "translated" by Joseph Smith from gold plates found

in the Hill Cumorah in the state of New York.

In his 1909 publication Roberts concluded that after looking at studies of the latest scientific examinations of ruins in Central and South America, he was convinced that there was no conflict between them and the claims of the Book of Mormon and that much of the archaeological science supported the Joseph Smith account. He cited numerous traditions and myths of Native Americans which were similar to Book of Mormon stories and which tended to prove the correctness of the Mormon scripture. He dismissed rather lightly any accusations that Joseph Smith could have used other works as a basis for a fictional account of the origins of the American Indians and even dismissed Ethan Smith's 1823 edition of *View of the Hebrews*, an error that he was to acknowledge in his later *Studies of the Book of Mormon*.

There were other arguments in support of the Nephite scripture, but he summarized his survey of archaeological findings by assuring readers that future explorations would only add further proof of the historicity of Joseph Smith's work. To average LDS church members in 1909, Roberts's *New Witnesses for God* substantiated their beliefs and further embellished his stature for them as a historian and defender of the Book of Mormon.¹ But only thirteen years later Roberts was to change his mind and that dramatically.

As one evidence of increasing American interest in the latest scientific investigations of ancient New World ruins, a Washington, D.C., investigator of Mormonism in 1921 asked five pointed questions challenging LDS beliefs. B. H. Roberts was asked by church leaders to respond, which he did with a study of 141 typewritten pages entitled "Book of Mormon Difficulties." He was able to satisfy himself about four of the inquiries: the diversity of primitive Indian languages which occurred over a relatively short period of one thousand years; Book of Mormon accounts of steel when the Jews had no knowledge of it in 600 B.C.E.; the Nephite use of "scimeters" years before such weapons were ever mentioned in literature; and the use of silk in America which was unknown at the time of Columbus.² The fifth question concerned the use of horses by Book of Mormon peoples, a problem, about which Roberts had written in 1909, that "constitutes one of our most embarrassing difficulties."³ In 1921 he again acknowledged that "nowhere has the evidence for the existence of the horse in America within historic times been found."⁴

1. For a fuller account of Roberts's conclusions in his *New Witnesses for God*, see B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brigham D. Madsen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 12-18, and B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 2d ed., ed. Brigham D. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 12-18.

2. *Ibid.*, 63-94, 108-143.

3. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1909), 17.

4. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 107.

This examination of the most recent studies of Maya and Inca civilizations led Roberts to a troubling review of his work of 1909 and an appeal to the First Presidency and fellow general authorities for an opportunity to present his "Difficulties" paper to them. His wish was granted and over a period of three days, in early 1922, LDS authorities went to school under the tutelage of Roberts. The meetings were quite disappointing to Roberts who had asked "that from the greater learning of the individual members of the Quorum of the Twelve, or from the collective wisdom of all the brethren addressed, or from the inspiration of the Lord as it may be received through the appointed channels of the priesthood of his Church, we might find such a solution of the problems presented."⁵

With the unsatisfactory response from his brethren who seemed little interested in his investigations, Roberts plunged ahead and completed an even more probing analysis of the Nephite scripture which he entitled *Studies of the Book of Mormon*. In this long critique, he made a careful comparison of the parallels between the Book of Mormon and Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, concluding that Joseph Smith could have used the minister's book as a "ground plan" for the Mormon scripture.⁶

In addition, Roberts examined the historical evidence that Joseph Smith possessed a creative imagination and a highly retentive memory which would have given him the intellectual tools necessary to write an invented work of the magnitude of the Book of Mormon.⁷ Then Roberts analyzed the internal evidence that the Book of Mormon was of human origin, and in his most devastating conclusion concerning the accounts of three anti-Christ in Nephite America, he wrote:

... 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 products of history, that they come upon the scene separated by long periods of time, and among a race which was the ancestral race of the red man of America.⁸

One can sympathize with Roberts and his sorrow that, after venerating and admiring Joseph Smith for a lifetime, he now had concluded that his hero was less than a prophet. In the introduction to *New Witnesses for God*, Roberts had laid out what he believed the results would be if Joseph Smith were indeed not what he purported to be:

5. *Ibid.*, 46.

6. *Ibid.*, 151-242.

7. *Ibid.*, 243-50.

8. *Ibid.*, 271.

While the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is but an incident in God's great work of the last days, ... still the incident of its coming forth and the book are facts of such importance that the whole work of God may be said in a manner to stand or fall with them. That is to say, if the origin of the Book of Mormon could be proved to be other than that set forth by Joseph Smith; if the book itself could be proved to be other than it claims to be, ... then the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and its message and doctrines, which, in some respects, may be said to have arisen out of the Book of Mormon, must fall; for if the book is other than it claims to be; if its origin is other than that ascribed to it by Joseph Smith, then Joseph Smith says that which is untrue; he is a false prophet of false prophets; and all he taught and all his claims to inspiration and divine authority, are not only in vain but wicked; and all that he did as a religious teacher is not only useless, but mischievous beyond human comprehending.⁹

As the premier longtime defender of the Book of Mormon, B. H. Roberts's historical investigations had finally directed him to the above indictment of Joseph Smith and the religion which he had founded. Roberts decided not to submit his *Studies* to his colleagues in the church hierarchy and confined the document to his personal papers until its publication in 1985. If the presiding elders of the LDS church could evince little interest in Roberts's scientific observations about New World civilizations in 1922, it is perhaps understandable that most lay members of the church might also dismiss the discoveries of that period of time.

With the passage of seventy-five years since Roberts's work on the origins of the American Indians, he would have a field day in examining the tremendous outpouring of scientific information now available. His method of over-kill in assembling and dissecting factual data would require several volumes. But to spare the reader, it may be instructive just to study the conclusions drawn by scientists in three summations of present knowledge concerning the origins of native races in the New World. These three books are Brian M. Fagan, *The Great Journey: The Peopling of Ancient America* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1987); Ronald C. Carlisle, comp. and ed., *Americans Before Columbus: Ice-Age Origins* (Pittsburgh: Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, 1988); and Tom D. Dillehay and David J. Meltzer, eds., *The First Americans: Search and Research* (Boca Raton, LA: CRC Press, 1991). As author Brian M. Fagan writes, "The literature on the peopling of America is so enormous and highly specialized that even experts have a hard time keeping up with the latest research. This book is based on thousands of different papers, monographs, reviews, and short reports in many languages."

9. *Ibid.*, 12.

The genesis for much of the studies thus described began with the development of "radiocarbon dating" by Willard Libby in 1949. As is well known, this procedure can be used to determine the age of charcoal, bone, and other organic materials to about 50,000 years ago.¹⁰ With this tool, scientists the world over have made some amazing discoveries about human origins, and that is particularly true of the native races of the Americas.

Much to the disquietude of many well-read and reflective Mormons today, the overwhelming evidence of these finds during the last fifty years casts grave doubts, if not outright disbelief, about the Book of Mormon as history. The Lost Tribes theories of Roberts's time have long since been discarded as, in one researcher's word, relegating "the American Indians to the same miserable status as that enjoyed by many European Jews."¹¹ To recite some well-known facts, scientists today are firm that Native Americans are related to the people of northeastern Siberia. One physical anthropologist has even found, for example, a "dental connection between the Americas and north China."¹² Two Chinese scholars have concluded that microblades with wedge-shaped cores were "widely distributed over much of northeast Asia and northwest America."¹³

In some investigations which would have intrigued Roberts, one investigator has also determined that there were three separate linguistic groups "that correspond to migrations to the Americas. ... So great are the differences between the three groups that there is little likelihood that they are branches of a single linguistic stock." There is some dispute about this idea, but the fact of the great diversity of Indian languages is readily recognized.¹⁴ In addition to the above discoveries, perhaps it can be anticipated that before long some scholar will examine the DNA of early inhabitants of eastern Siberia and the DNA of early American Indians for confirmation of their relationship. All that would be left would be for an interested Mormon to compare the two findings to the DNA of Israelites who lived about 600 B.C.E.

With Asiatic origins firmly established, archaeologists, geologists, and geographers have similarly determined that a land bridge across the Bering Sea was open to migration at 12,000 to 14,000 years ago and again at 9,000 to 11,000 years ago. Most scholars also agree that the migration

10. Fagan, *The Great Journey*, 53-54.

11. *Ibid.*, 25.

12. H. E. Wright, "Environmental Conditions for Paleoindian Immigration," in *The First Americans*, 113; J. M. Beaton, "Colonizing Continents: Some Problems from Australia and the Americas," in *The First Americans*, 210; Larry D. Agenbroad, "Clovis People: The Human Factor in the Pleistocene Magafauna Extinction Equation," in *Americans Before Columbus*, 64; Fagan, *The Great Journey*, 94-95, 185.

13. Fagan, *The Great Journey*, 95-96.

14. *Ibid.*, 186.

south from the land bridge was by way of the ice-free Alberta Corridor in west central Canada.¹⁵

When did the first people make this long journey from eastern Siberia to the plains of North America? Here there is consensus. "The earliest universally accepted cultural entity in the southwest is the Clovis Culture. This fluted point tradition ... was formally named for the prolific site at Blackwater Draw, near Clovis, New Mexico."¹⁶ The same author continues, "The earliest undisputed archaeological sites in the New World south of the glacial ice are between 11,500 and 11,000 years old."¹⁷ And again, "Although there are claims of earlier human presence in the New World, the Clovis Culture appears to be the first widespread archaeologically visible and universally accepted American population."¹⁸ Fagan sums up his colleague's conclusions about these first Americans:

About 11,500 years ago, the highly distinct Clovis Culture appeared on the Great Plains of North America, a culture documented from dozens of sites where stone artifacts have been found in direct association with the bones of large, extinct Ice Age mammals like the mammoth, mastodon, and extinct bison. Most Clovis sites are radiocarbon-dated to the five centuries after 11,500 years ago. The dating is so precise that twenty-one dates from the Lehner and Murray Springs kill sites in Arizona give a mean reading of 11,000 +/- 200 years ago, a remarkably consistent result by radiocarbon standards.

This was a dramatic period in American prehistory. ... At this watershed in America's past we emerge from the shadows into the sunlight, for every scholar, whatever his or her views on the dating of first settlement, agrees that Clovis people flourished over wide areas of North America after 11,500 years ago.¹⁹

With this widely-accepted evidence of the first peopling of the Americas over eleven thousand years ago, one wonders how LDS church members today reconcile the Book of Mormon narrative of New World settlement by the Nephites around 600 B.C.E. as being the means by which the New World was occupied by the ancestors of the American Indians.

Finally, to end this brief examination of present scientific knowledge

15. Agenbroad, "Clovis People," 65; Donald K. Grayson, "Perspectives on the Archaeology of the First Americans," in *Americans Before Columbus*, 118-89; Fagan, *The Great Journey*, 127.

16. Agenbroad, "Clovis People," 63.

17. *Ibid.*, 119.

18. *Ibid.*, 72, see also R. E. Taylor, "Frameworks for Dating the Late Pleistocene Peopling of the Americas," in *The First Americans*, 102-12.

19. Fagan, *The Great Journey*, 177.

about the settling of the Americas, just a word about Book of Mormon claims that the Nephites had such domestic animals as horses, asses, oxen, cows, sheep, swine, and goats.²⁰ While the Old World had the “Big Five” domesticated animals (sheep, goats, horses, cattle, and pigs) as physiologist James M. Diamond explains, “New World attempts at domestication did not begin until a few thousand years after the start of attempts in the Old World and resulted in only four established species of livestock.” These were: the llama as a pack animal, the alpaca for its wool, and the guinea pig and turkey kept for food. Diamond continues, “[N]o New World domestic animal was used to pull a plough, a cart or war chariot, to transport a person, or to give milk, and their collective contribution to animal protein for human consumption was much less than that of the Old World domesticates.”²¹

With the obvious contradictions of settlement and domestic animals plus many other Book of Mormon problems, it is little wonder that B. H. Roberts could ask of his fellow church leaders even in 1922:

What shall our answer be then? Shall we boldly acknowledge the difficulties in the case, confess that the evidences and conclusions of the authorities are against us, but notwithstanding all that, we take our position on the Book of Mormon and place its revealed truths against the declarations of men, however learned, and await the vindication of the revealed truth? Is there any other course than this? And yet the difficulties to this position are very grave. Truly we may ask “who will believe our report?” in that case. What will the effect be upon our youth of such a confession of inability to give a more reasonable answer to the questions submitted, and the awaiting of proof for final vindication? Will not the hoped for proof deferred indeed make the heart sick?²²

Obviously, the Roberts of a half-century of defending the Book of Mormon was sick at heart himself because of his discoveries based on the scholarly developments of his day.

Over seventy years later, loyal but questioning Mormons represent a much larger number of truth-seekers now that there are over nine million Latter-day Saints as compared to a few hundred thousand in the 1920s. The appearance the last few years of a number of independent “study groups” and organizations devoted to examinations of the practices, doctrines, and especially the historical origins of the Mormon church has led to increased awareness of the kind of problems Roberts wrestled with in

20. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 96-98.

21. Jared M. Diamond, “Why Was Post-Pleistocene Development of Human Societies Slightly More Rapid in the Old World Than in the New World?” in *Americans Before Columbus*, 26-27.

22. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 115.

his day. The B. H. Roberts Society holds forth periodically in an auditorium at the University of Utah. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and *Sunstone* regularly publish more and more “daring” articles about LDS scriptures and beliefs. Signature Books has published numerous books concerned with the history and origins of the LDS faith.

As an example of the latter, examine just a few of the essays in the recent work, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe.²³ One author concludes, “Understanding the Book of Mormon as a fictional work of nineteenth-century scripture has real advantages.”²⁴ Another writes, “Some might think that acceptance of the conclusion that Joseph Smith is the author of the Book of Mormon requires rejecting the work as religiously relevant and significant. I append this afterword to make it clear that such a rejection does not follow from this critical judgment. Historical conclusions about a scriptural text, such as who authored it, are *existential* judgments, ... and can and should be separated from judgments about *spiritual* values.”²⁵ B. H. Roberts would have approved of that last statement. A third essayist remarks, “Given the evidence presented in this essay, it is reasonable to conclude that some of the details of events in the Book of Mormon are not literally historical.”²⁶ A fourth contributor declares, “Unfortunately there is no direct evidence to support the historical claims of the Book of Mormon—nothing archaeological, nothing philological.”²⁷ Finally, one writer expounds, “intrinsically woven into the Book of Mormon’s fabric are not only remnants of the peculiar dictation sequence but threads of authorship. The composite of those elements explored in this essay point to Smith as the narrator’s chief designer.”²⁸ Other books published by Signature Books and also by the University of Illinois Press are concerned with scholarly works on Mormonism, but the Metcalfe volume is sufficient to illustrate that some of them can cast serious questions on the Book of Mormon as history.

The most visible notice of the surge of interest by questioning Mormons about problems faced by their church is the annual Sunstone Sym-

23. Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993).

24. Anthony A. Hutchinson, “The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-century Scripture,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, 17.

25. David P. Wright, “‘In Plain Terms That We May Understand’: Joseph Smith’s Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12-13,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, 211.

26. John C. Kunich, “Multiply Exceedingly: Book of Mormon Population Sizes,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, 264.

27. Edward H. Ashment, “‘A Record in the Language of My Father’: Evidence of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew in the Book of Mormon,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, 374.

28. Brent Lee Metcalfe, “The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, 433.

posium held in Salt Lake City. As many as 1,500 people gather, over a three-day session, to hear papers on almost every imaginable subject concerned with Mormonism. But lying underneath some presentations is the nagging question: "Were there really gold plates and ministering angels or was there just Joseph Smith seated at a table with his face in a hat dictating to a scribe a fictional account of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas?" Although church leaders may dismiss publicly the annual gathering of the numerous Sunstonians, their numbers and concerns must engender some disquietude on the part of LDS authorities. To many observers, the Sunstone Symposium represents the tip of a large iceberg of loyal but questioning Mormons.

The reaction of LDS leaders to the growing body of intellectual challenges to many aspects of Mormonism was highlighted a few years ago by the obvious paranoia about the fraudulent activities of Mark Hofmann. His fictitious salamander letter and other highly imaginative documents revealed apostolic concern that some horrible historical discovery would expose the secret fears that perhaps the Joseph Smith first-vision-gold-plates story was fraudulent after all. One of the problems is that the LDS church is not the only institution that has vaults; universities and historical societies also have vaults for important historical documents. Like Edgar Allan Poe's "Raven," Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon creation rests mordantly above the church's door whispering, "Never—nevermore."

The recent spate of excommunications lists many reasons for the expulsions. To an outsider they might seem somewhat superficial and inconsequential: praying to a Mother in Heaven; priesthood for women; and written or oral criticism of church leaders. The basic reason may lie behind these announced causes: the hidden apprehension that some scholar will come up with convincing proof that the Book of Mormon is not history. B. H. Roberts had the instinct for what is significant in Mormonism—not such issues as those listed above, important as they are, but the true origins of the LDS faith—the Book of Mormon as history or as a figment of Joseph Smith's imagination and creativity.

Many members of the Mormon church teeter on the edge of the precipice of Book of Mormon historicity. They hang on to their beliefs and loyalty despite harassments and sometimes ludicrous pronouncements from church leaders until suddenly they discover what many suspected all along—"all that he [Joseph Smith] did as a religious teacher is not only useless, but mischievous beyond human comprehending."²⁹

What should such disbelievers do about their church membership? The history of the New England Congregational church can be instruc-

29. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 12.

tive at least in an academic sense. By the 1660s many New Englanders, Puritans on Sunday but Yankees on Monday, would no longer put up with the rigid church regimen prescribed by their ministers:

And the failure of large numbers of adults to prove their sanctity and gain admission to the church left their children unbaptized, without the fold. Faced by the dilemma of being consistent to the point where church membership would dwindle away to the vanishing point, or breaking down the system in order to keep the churches going, the New England ministers held a synod in 1662, which threshed the whole matter out. The result was a system known as the Half-Way Covenant, by which the children of adults who were not communicants could be baptized if their parents made a mere profession of faith.³⁰

The partial covenant not only kept the dissidents contributing financially to the church, but continued to allow their children to receive the moral and spiritual training the church offered. The latter concern keeps many unbelieving Latter-day Saint parents of today going to church at least until their children gain adulthood. It is doubtful that present LDS leaders will adopt any legal Half-Way Covenant. Parents will just have to continue the informal procedure listed above. The problem for the Mormon church is that after the children of half-way parents reach their teens, the fathers and mothers will drift away, denying their church the intellectual stimulation and support that such a large institution needs and deserves.

While LDS leaders in Salt Lake City continue their aggressive preaching of the Book of Mormon, despite the overwhelming scientific proofs of its fictional character, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has adopted a different approach. In the 1960s some RLDS intellectuals "raised the same kinds of issues that Roberts's three studies discuss" and finally concluded: "As a result of public and private discussion, church leaders have soft-pedalled the Book of Mormon in church curricula and publications."³¹ Under the present administration of the Salt Lake City LDS church, it is unlikely that the wise practice of the RLDS will be followed, but with new leaders in the future it may be possible to begin to "soft pedal" the Book of Mormon and so retain as members the thousands of thoughtful and loyal Mormons who do not accept the Book of Mormon as history, besides presenting to the world a more rational religion.

It is possible, as did B. H. Roberts during the last decade of his life, to emphasize the religious and spiritual values in the Book of Mormon and

30. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956), 172.

31. William D. Russell, review, *Utah Historical Quarterly* 55 (Fall 1987): 376.

to use these moral lessons as a driving force for missionary work without having to repeat such purported historical incidents as the amazing account of the 2,060 stripling "Lamanite" soldiers who fought through a thirteen-year war and who "Nevertheless according to the goodness of God ... not one soul of them did perish." In one particular battle, according to this wondrous fable, "Yea, neither was there one soul among them who had not received many wounds." Roberts dismissed this account: "Beautiful story of faith! ... Is it history? Or is it a wonder-tale of a pious but immature mind?"³²

Most of the thousands of Mormon disbelievers in the Book of Mormon want to retain their activity and membership in their church because of the values they perceive in it. They cherish the Word of Wisdom and its rules of health; they applaud the church's stand for strong family values in a time of moral decay; they sustain the old puritan virtues espoused by their church leaders; they rejoice in their proud traditions of sacrifice; they thrill to the strains of the old hymn, "Come, Come Ye Saints"; and, above all, in the words of non-Mormon historian, Jan Shippo, they endorse "a system that works to make people know they matter. It gives people a place where they fit in, in a world in which everybody is moving."³³

These choice but questioning members of the LDS faith recognize that B. H. Roberts was wrong when he predicted that if the Book of Mormon "could be proved to be other than it claims to be, ... then the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ... must fall."³⁴ An organization of nine million adherents with great financial assets will continue because it has a life of its own. But dismissing that rather cynical approach, the LDS church will continue to expand because of the values listed above and because its members want it to continue to have an important place in their lives. With a willingness on the part of LDS church leaders to face up to the evidence of history and with a better understanding of the needs and desires of their members, many doubting Mormons may still be able to join with their congregations each Sunday to sing "No toil nor labor fear, But with joy, wend your way."

32. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 272-73.

33. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 6 Nov. 1993.

34. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 12.