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(Chs. 19, 39–45)

Andrew C. Skinner

Early in life, B. H. Roberts obtained a deep conviction of the divinity of the Savior. That conviction became the core of his testimony of restored truth. In 1903 he wrote:

I know that my redeemer lives. I feel it in every fiber of my being. I am just as satisfied of it as I am my own existence. I cannot feel more sure of my own being than I do that my Redeemer lives, and that my God lives, the Father of my Savior. I feel it in my soul; I am converted to it in my whole being. I bear testimony to you that this is the doctrine of Christ, the Gospel of Jesus, which is the power of God unto salvation. It is “Mormonism.”¹

In *TWL*, his final treatise drawn together during the twilight of his life, Roberts continued to emphasize the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the culmination of all temporal and eternal events. For Roberts, the Atonement was the truth upon which all other truths are established, and the truth to which all other realities point. *TWL* ought to be seen as the ultimate manifestation of his conviction that the Savior’s sacrifice occupied the central place in history, which Roberts viewed as the unfolding of the plan of salvation according to the operation of universal law.

An introductory note to chapter 40 shows that Roberts intended chapters 40–45 to be taken as a unit. He asked readers to suspend judgment until all these chapters were read and digested together. These chapters form the pivotal part of Roberts’s explication of the grand sweep of God’s plan in earth’s history.

Roberts is indebted to earlier studies of the Atonement, including the writings of President John Taylor and Elder James E. Talmage.² In terms of format, chapters 40–45 in *TWL* are much like President Taylor’s classic *The Mediation and Atonement*.³ Both works quote numerous and sometimes lengthy passages of scripture and intersperse words of

explanation to tie the concepts together. This format creates a persuasive argument for the reality, need, and efficacy of the Atonement.

Roberts's discussion of the Atonement is in most respects a summary of concepts and doctrines taught previously in his many earlier writings, especially the fourth year of *The Seventy's Course in Theology*.⁴ *TWL* demonstrates that, at the very least, four points are beyond dispute for Roberts. First, the advent of Christ was a historical reality, long foretold by prophets (396, 403). Second, Christ was God, revealed in the flesh as the express image of God the Father (182, 185). Third, an atonement was necessary because "the inexorableness of law" demanded it (408-9). Fourth, "the Atonement of Christ is [also] a grand reality,"⁵ and the resurrection of Jesus a "stupendous fact" beyond the possibility of doubt (391-92). No incident is more emphatically proven (395). The Resurrection was and is as real as any other temporal actuality or certainty.

Roberts's chapters on the Atonement are prefaced by chapters 19 and 39, "The Revelation of God in Jesus Christ" and "The Meridian Dispensation," which describe the nature and mission of Jesus as "the Christ" and the "revelation of the person of God [the Father] to the children of men as well as a revelation of God's attributes" (185). For Roberts, Jesus is the complete and exact likeness of the character, personality, and attributes of God the Father. But Roberts also describes the dual nature of the person of Jesus, as when he makes reference to "Jesus of Nazareth, the great Peasant Teacher of Judea!" (186).⁶ In the words of Roberts, the revelation of Jesus Christ will leave no excuse for anyone to say "they know not God" (186).

For his purposes, Roberts believes that the most appropriate data on the "revelation of God through the person of Jesus Christ" is in the New Testament. Hence, Roberts uses the New Testament in his discussion of the Atonement more extensively than any other scripture. He is especially fond of the writings of the Apostle John.⁷

Roberts's conviction of the validity and inspired nature of the New Testament is plainly set forth in his earlier writings. This conviction is implicit in *TWL*. In 1888, Roberts had said of the New Testament that

as long as even one of these books remains unshaken as to its authenticity and inspiration, you have a witness for God and Christ in it. . . . But the preponderance of evidence is in favor of the inspiration of all the books of the New Testament. . . . [Therefore] it is not one witness for God and Christ, but a collection of the testimonies of a number of witnesses.⁸

Roberts believed that, properly presented, the biblical evidence for the existence, character, and attributes of God, as well as the existence,

character, and mission of God's son, Jesus Christ, is overwhelming and irrefutable among "intelligent men."⁹ Thus, one detects in *TWL* an attempt to craft a careful argument to persuade all "intelligent" human beings of the efficacy and reality of the atonement of Christ, and this argument is presented by appeal to what Roberts considered the unsailable evidence of the New Testament.

Today, Latter-day Saints expect Book of Mormon references to be used in support of certain doctrinal points. Widespread use of the Book of Mormon to answer doctrinal and theological questions, however, is a fairly recent development. In Roberts's day, LDS discussions about the Atonement did not usually draw heavily upon the Book of Mormon. James E. Talmage's systematic explication of the Atonement in *The Articles of Faith*, for example, utilizes the New Testament to a far greater extent than it uses the Book of Mormon.¹⁰ So, too, with *TWL*, which bears a certain resemblance to Talmage's work in terms of style and content. In fact, a statement by Elder Talmage, for whom Roberts was a friend and doctrinal confidant,¹¹ captures the scriptural tone of both atonement discourses: "The New Testament, which is properly regarded as the scripture of Christ's mission among men, is imbued throughout with the doctrine of salvation through the work of atonement wrought by the Savior."¹² This predilection for biblical proofs in doctrinal exposition appears in the records of Joseph Smith's sermons and teachings as well. Such proofs were largely formulated for the benefit of a particular audience.

The general tone of *TWL* and certain telling passages indicate that Roberts was not writing to a Mormon audience alone. When explaining the significance of Romans 5:14-16, for example, which addresses the free universal redemption from death through Jesus Christ, Roberts says: "In view of this, the Church of the Latter-day Saints say in their summary of faith: 'We believe that all men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression'" (412). Aside from the fact that he inserts a word ("all") into this Article of Faith to make a theological point, the tone of Roberts's statement is that of a Mormon apologist or, more precisely, a missionary attempting to win converts. In another passage, Roberts refers to baptism and the Lord's Supper as "The Two Great Christian Sacraments" (387). Such ecumenical-sounding terminology suggests that Roberts is trying to create some common ground with those he is attempting to persuade. Roberts goes on to say, in language somewhat unfamiliar to the typical Mormon ear, "This ordinance [baptism] is to be preceded by a *confession of faith*" (388; italics added). This kind of language, in addition to Roberts's appeals to non-Mormon experts in the fields of theology and moral philosophy,

supports the conclusion that he was addressing a broad, thoughtful audience, part of whom would accept biblical more than Book of Mormon evidence.

Roberts makes a valuable contribution to the general understanding and awareness of New Testament discussions on the Atonement by highlighting the few passages which explicitly state that Christ was *sinless* (410–11). Roberts also provides a simplified explication of Paul’s intent. Because Christ was sinless, he suffered not for his own sins, but for ours. God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to do for individuals what they could not accomplish for themselves “because of the flesh (human nature)” (411). Here, too, Roberts acknowledges the powerful effects of the fall of Adam. But because of the atonement of Christ, humans bear no personal responsibility for that Fall; Christ atoned for it as well, and the effects of this payment were in place even before Adam himself finished his mortal probation (410–11).

While Roberts relied primarily on biblical support for his atonement chapters, such reliance does not mean that Roberts neglected the Book of Mormon’s contribution to the doctrine of atonement. To the contrary, Roberts’s discussion is so full of Book of Mormon language that the careful reader soon realizes that the Book of Mormon was an integral part of Roberts’s vocabulary and thought processes. A case in point is his use of the phrase “infinite atonement”:

It was, then, an Atonement made by God; and by virtue of that fact it was the highest atonement that could in any way be made—a supreme sacrifice indeed! And that is why, no doubt, it is so frequently referred to as “an infinite atonement.” It is a supreme sacrifice because it was made by a Deity. (412)

Nowhere in this excerpt is explicit reference made to the Book of Mormon. But surely Roberts had the Book of Mormon in mind, for nowhere except in the Book of Mormon is the phrase “infinite atonement” ever used, let alone “frequently referred to” (see 2 Ne. 9:7; 25:16; and Alma 34:10–14).

In addition to using Book of Mormon language, Roberts employed some of the Book of Mormon’s important atonement passages in *TWL*. He quotes Alma 34:8–14 in its entirety, but in a fascinating and unexpected way. Specifically, he uses Amulek’s atonement pericope to refute the suggestion of Origen, the great third-century theologian, that God—owing to his supreme sovereignty—could forgive “out of hand.” According to Roberts, Origen adopted this view in the belief that “remission of sins is made to depend upon arbitrary will without reference to retributive justice” (426). In refuting Origen’s view, Roberts uses Amulek’s words

and certain New Testament passages (Hebrews 9 and 10) to argue that even the ancient practice of sacrificing animals could not satisfy the “claims of justice for man’s transgression of the law” (426).¹³

Roberts’s primary emphasis in his atonement chapters is the consistency, immutability, and overarching governance of law. For Roberts, “inexorableness is of the essence of law” (404). Law reigns in the universe; everyone and everything is “under the dominion of law” (404). For Roberts, the “reign of law” (a favorite phrase) has several features. The law guarantees regularity. That regularity, however, makes atonement absolutely necessary. Each violation of the law brings a penalty which must be exacted. Hence, atonement “is but the vindication of the law” (422).

Roberts’s concept of the universal reign of law dictates his views about the attributes of God. Because law is absolute and unchangeable, for example, God does not have to be immutable. He can, in Roberts’s view, progress even in knowledge: “new thoughts and new vistas may appear” (417). God’s other attributes depend upon law as well. God is limited in power, might, dominion, and knowledge by the reign of law. Thus, one can only believe in the traditional “omni’s” attributed to God if those “omni’s” are qualified. As Roberts states:

The attribute “Omnipotence” must needs be thought upon also as somewhat limited. . . . [There] are things that limit even God’s Omnipotence. What then, is meant by the ascription of the attribute Omnipotence to God? Simply that all that may or can be done by power *conditioned* by other eternal existences—duration, space, matter, truth, justice, reign of law, God can do. But even he may *not* act out of harmony with the other eternal existences which condition or limit even him. (418; italics added)

Roberts does allow in a minimal way for the possibility that God reigns supreme, above the law:

If the idea of the “reign of law” be set aside and there be substituted for it the “reign of God” by his sovereign will, independent of law, even then we must postulate such conception of the attributes of God that regularity will result from his personal government, not capriciousness, today one thing, tomorrow another. (404-5)

But for Roberts, this possibility is merely an obfuscation of the true picture. Law reigns! Hence, “the law that was broken in Eden must stand vindicated at *the bar of the reign of law*” (412; italics added). That vindication, of course, comes through the atonement of Christ.

Roberts’s views on law and the nature of God did not go unchallenged. In one way or another, most of the objections raised by the Twelve concerning *TWL*’s atonement chapters were related to Roberts’s

emphasis on the reign of law. Specifically, the committee of the Quorum of the Twelve argued that the scriptures teach that God is the author of all things, including law (D&C 88:42), and that God is therefore the supreme sovereign over everyone and everything. Furthermore, the committee argued, God does not progress in knowledge because he knows *all* things (2 Ne. 9:20).¹⁴

Roberts's views on the reign of law seem much more emphatic, strident, and expanded in *TWL* than in his *Seventy's Course in Theology*. A comparison of the two reveals that in the latter the term "justice" is used sometimes in place of "law" (for example, "the inexorableness of justice"). In addition, the justice and law discussion in *Seventy's Course in Theology* was immediately juxtaposed with a section on "mercy," thereby softening the discourse somewhat.¹⁵ Still, that softening does not nullify the fact that Roberts's basic view of a universe under the reign of law was published there in 1911 without significant objection many years before *TWL* became an issue.¹⁶

Perhaps the best way to summarize the difference between the views expressed in *Seventy's Course in Theology* and those in *TWL* is this: the views found in *TWL* are more explicit and thus more evocative of opposition. Those views reflect the increased influence of John Fiske's *Studies in Religion*. That book had significantly influenced Roberts's initial views;¹⁷ Roberts subscribed even more intently to Fiske in the last years of his writing career (408). Hence, *TWL* challenged the absolute dominion of God in a more direct way than did *Seventy's Course*. Indeed, Roberts's undeniable belief in the "perfect reign of law, and reign of perfect law" (424) probably sounded blasphemous to some.¹⁸

While the committee objected to Roberts's idea about the reign of law and its ramifications for God's sovereignty, Roberts nevertheless held an exalted conception of God and Jesus Christ. They are divine and perfect. Humans, to the extent they violate divine law, are fallen and sinful. A careful reading of *TWL*'s atonement chapters discloses Roberts's reverence for the calling and mission of the Messiah. That reverence is evidenced in Roberts's consistent reference to Jesus not simply as Christ but as "the Christ"; this reference reflects Jesus' salvific office in relation to humanity. The vicarious suffering of this "one Divine Intelligence" (453) is the especial doctrine on which the gospel is based. Roberts's noble purpose in writing was:

To teach and to demonstrate, first of all, God-love for man, by a sacrifice that tasks God that man might be saved; and second, to inspire man-love for God, by the demonstration that God first loved man, and how deeply God loved him; and third, to teach man-love for man. (453-54)

NOTES

¹B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1903), 294–95.

²Talmage's influence is discussed later in this article.

³John Taylor, *The Mediation and Atonement* (1882; reprint, Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1970).

⁴B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology, Fourth Year: The Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911). See Truman G. Madsen, "B. H. Roberts: The Book of Mormon and the Atonement," in Monte Nyman and Charles Tate, eds., *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1988), 297–314.

⁵B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel and Man's Relationship to Deity*, 11th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 10.

⁶This epithet has a familiar ring owing to the title of a recently published biography of Jesus which refers to him as a "Mediterranean Jewish Peasant." John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

⁷He makes reference to John's Gospel and Epistles three times more than the next most cited book, which is also found in the New Testament (Romans). The references to passages in the Gospel of John alone are almost twice as many as any other book of scripture.

⁸Roberts, *Gospel*, 62–63.

⁹Roberts, *Gospel*, 80.

¹⁰James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 25th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1947), 74–93.

¹¹Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 79, 176, 194, 239, 320, 346.

¹²Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 74.

¹³In addition, *TWL* ch. 44 contains several explicit references to Book of Mormon passages. Roberts also used the Book of Mormon in his discussion on the mode of baptism, stating that "the official formula for this ordinance [was] given by the risen Christ to the Nephites in America" (3 Ne. 11:23–26). Roberts also declares that 3 Nephi 11 presents a "most dramatic and soul-thrilling testimony to the resurrection of Christ" (394). This is hardly the language of someone who has problems with the Book of Mormon. Even more impressive is the fact that Roberts's declaration (394) follows immediately after his quotation of Joseph Smith's witness of the resurrected Christ (D&C 76:22–23).

¹⁴Similar expanded doctrinal expositions that argue against Roberts's position on the nature of law may be found in more recent treatments of the issue of law and the nature of God. For a general introduction to the positions, see Carl S. Hawkins and Douglas Parker, "Divine and Eternal Law," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:808–10. Two recent articles by one author refute Elder Roberts's position: LaMar E. Garrard, "What Is Man?" *Hearken, O Ye People: Discourses on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Sandy, Utah: Randall Book, 1984), 133–52; and LaMar E. Garrard, "God, Natural Law, and the Doctrine and Covenants," in *Doctrines for Exaltation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 55–76.

¹⁵Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology* 4:105-9, 82-86.

¹⁶Sometimes the wording of certain parts of the same topics being discussed in both *Seventy's Course* and *TWL* is exact.

¹⁷Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology* 4:86.

¹⁸Another significant reason for the objections being raised about *TWL* and not *Seventy's Course* may have been changes in the membership of the Quorum of the Twelve.