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(Ch. 47)

Richard C. Roberts

In chapter 47, Roberts outlines the history of the Restoration and the opening of the dispensation of the fullness of times, during which “the Way” was expanded to its greatest lengths. Being knowledgeable about many significant events in the story of the Latter-day Saints—from the life of Joseph Smith to the Missouri persecutions, the rise and fall of Nauvoo, and the pioneer settlement of the West—Roberts could have approached this story in many ways. Consistent with the themes of other chapters in *TWL*, however, he chose to mention only the visions of the Restoration in which heavenly messengers revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith the knowledge and power necessary to the plan of salvation.

Summary

Roberts first presents the New Testament prophecies of Peter, Paul, and John found in Acts 3:1-21, Ephesians 1:8-10, and Revelation 14:6-7. (Roberts also cross-referenced his personal Bible to 2 Peter 3:1-9.) Roberts found that these prophecies unitedly refer to a future “in-coming” of the dispensation of the fullness of times.

Roberts next recounted the early history of Joseph Smith and his role as the prophet who opened the new dispensation. Roberts calls James 1:5-7 the “Golden Text,” for it led Joseph Smith to pray for an answer to the question, “Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together?” (JS-H 1:10). Roberts called the answer that Joseph received the “first vision of the New Dispensation.”

The term “first vision” implies a “second,” and Roberts denominates the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as the “second vision of the New Dispensation.” In his explanation of the Book of Mormon, Roberts describes the Jaredites as a people who came “from the tower of Babel

at the time of the dispersion of the people from the Euphrates Valley,” and he locates them in the New World in the “southern part of Central America for a period of sixteen centuries from 2200 B.C. to about 600 B.C.” He then describes how the Nephites, augmented by the Mulekites, eventually lost touch with faith and righteousness until their civilization was overthrown, surviving “only in the tribal relations such as existed at the advent of the Europeans” (469). Roberts maintains that the Book of Mormon was a record of the “hand-dealings” of God with ancient people and points out that the risen Christ visited them and introduced the fullness of the gospel to them with all the principles and the ordinances “necessary to salvation. Therefore it contains the fullness of the gospel” (470). This book was a “New Witness” to things also contained in the Bible. Joseph Smith was given the power and the means through the Urim and Thummim to translate the golden plates into English. Roberts was happy to report that the Book of Mormon had subsequently been translated into fifteen of the world’s languages.

Roberts presents as the “third vision” the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, the visitation of John the Baptist to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery on May 15, 1829. During that appearance, John conferred upon Joseph and Oliver the “keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins” (D&C 13:1).

The “fourth vision” was the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood by Peter, James, and John. Those three bestowed upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery the “keys of the kingdom under which plenary power they were authorized to proceed with the preaching of the gospel, organizing the church, and doing whatsoever might be necessary to bring it in and establish the New Dispensation of the gospel, and prepare the world for the glorious coming of the Lord Jesus, and the founding of his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven” (471). In addition to describing Peter, James, and John’s visit, Roberts spends some time candidly dealing with the estimated date (June 1829) of this event.¹

Roberts next treats the “development of the new dispensation.” Here he shows how The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized through “continuous revelation.” Holders of the Aaronic Priesthood were charged with administering in the temporal things of the Church—“the outward ordinances of the gospel and the administration of the details of the financial affairs of the church, in gathering tithes, and accounting for them and distributing the charities of the church” (471)—under the supervision of the Melchizedek Priesthood. The Melchizedek Priesthood held authority to “act for God,” especially

in spiritual matters—including performing ordinances in the holy temples, preaching the gospel and administering in all its ordinances, teaching and expounding gospel truths, and “warning the nations of judgments to come, and of the approaching time when the Son of Man shall again appear on the earth and open up the promised reign of righteousness and peace” (472). The two priesthoods were to conduct their functions in the spirit of unfeigned love, “by persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, by meekness and by love unfeigned, by kindness and pure knowledge” (472). According to Roberts, this was the same organization, though somewhat amplified, as was established by Christ in the great meridian dispensation. The Church, so organized, has two functions: to teach God’s revealed truth to all people and to perfect the lives of those who accept God’s message—the Truth.

Roberts next describes the organization of the Church on April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York. This action restored to the world “the Way,” which is the full and complete restoration of the everlasting gospel, “uniting in one all the previous dispensations of it,” and allowing for the “expanding toward that fullness of knowledge through the revelations of God” which would come later to “gather together all things in Christ,” both things which are in heaven and in earth, “even in him” (473).

Roberts next shows how the newly established Church of the dispensation of the fullness of times is an “enlargement of the new dispensation over others.” He does so by telling of the visions in the Kirtland Temple in 1836. These visions are enlargements on the gospel that were not fully understood until this time. The first Kirtland vision was the “vision of the Savior” in the temple. In that vision, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery saw the Savior in his glory and he proclaimed to them, “I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father” (D&C 110:4). He also said that their sins were forgiven, and he accepted “this house.” A marvelous vision.

Next came a vision in which Moses appeared to Joseph and Oliver and “committed unto them the keys of the gathering of Israel.” This conferral of keys would open the way to restore Israel to its proper place in God’s plan of things—something to be accomplished in the new dispensation.

There followed the vision of one Elias, whom Roberts identifies as Melchizedek, the important high priest from the era of Abraham. The purpose of Melchizedek’s appearance was to deliver the keys relating to the blessing of Abraham’s seed and all subsequent generations. Roberts also noted that Melchizedek restored “something of patriarchal power and blessing since he said unto the brethren that in them and

their seed all generations after them should be blessed and this is of patriarchal character” (474).

Finally, Roberts describes the vision of Elijah, which was characterized by those who received it as “great and glorious” (D&C 110:13). Elijah said that he came in fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi (Mal. 4:5–6). Roberts emphasizes in his discussion the extension of the Atonement not only to the living, but also to those who have died. From 1 Peter and 1 Corinthians, Roberts reasons that in addition to baptism for the dead, early Christians also performed “other ordinances . . . vicariously administered in behalf of the dead” (475). These ordinances included confirmation, baptism by the Spirit (conferral of the gift of the Holy Ghost), ordination to the priesthood, marriage, and eternal marriage. Roberts concludes that “the gospel of Christ is not limited, then, in its power to save to this earth life, or this world alone. Its powers enter into the spirit world” (476). In light of this power, Roberts emphasizes how important the work of Elijah is in turning the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. Indeed, Roberts points out that Mormons have continually sought to build temples to carry out these necessary ordinances for themselves and their progenitors.

When this “renewal of the way” is consummated, it will usher in the coming of the kingdom of God on earth, and things will be done on earth as in heaven. Always the missionary, Roberts concludes that “the Way” needs to be preached to the world and that hearers of the word, through faith and the spirit and their agency, will discern that it is true. As Paul said, “Faith cometh by hearing the word of God.” Roberts similarly affirms that the Prophet of the New Dispensation relied “upon that hearing of the word of God” for the convincing power of its truth. In that same spirit and in “confidence of its [the word’s] innate power of convincing men of the truth,” Roberts submitted “this brief account of the restoration of the Way of eternal life to the children of men” (477).

Sources

B. H. Roberts used a variety of sources in writing this chapter. For his scriptural sources, he used mainly the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants. His personal Bible contains many cross-references (for instance, 1 Thessalonians 4:14; 2 Peter 3:1–9; and Alma 11:45) to points that appear in this chapter. The B. H. Roberts Collection in the LDS Church Archives contains a 1922 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants that was evidently Roberts’s personal copy.

Sections 1, 20, 110, 127, and 128 have Roberts’s handwritten notations in the margins. In section 20, Roberts refers to the Articles of Faith and Galatians 6:1. Section 127:8 has the following note: “The ritual of the priesthood to be revealed. Important announcement as to temple ritual in P.” In section 128:5, Roberts notes “things of salvation of dead arranged before foundation of world.” His comment on section 128:18 says, “New things to be revealed.” These cross references and notes indicate that Roberts studied many of the ideas in chapter 47 over a long period of time.

The summary page for chapter 47 lists several references not specifically cited in the chapter’s footnotes. Reviewing these references, I note that Roberts refers to Orson Pratt’s *Remarkable Visions*,² a pamphlet first printed in 1841. *Remarkable Visions* deals with the visions of Joseph Smith and the receiving and translating of the gold plates, themes also articulated by Roberts. Another reference, Osborne Widtsoe’s *The Restoration of the Gospel*,³ written by a principal of the Latter-day Saint High School, was a small book used in 1910–11 as a course of study for the Young Ladies’ MIA program. This straightforward account of the restoration of the Church cited Roberts’s “History of the Church” in *Americana Magazine*.⁴

Two of Roberts’s references were apparently given to add evidence to the truthfulness of the Restoration by demonstrating the antiquity of the doctrine of salvation for the dead. Specifically, Roberts mentions an *Improvement Era* article on “The Epistle of Kallikrates,” a Greek manuscript found in North Africa in 1927.⁵ Reputed to be an early Christian letter sent by a Corinthian Christian convert to the Apostle Paul in Rome, the Epistle of Kallikrates featured a fragmented account of baptism for the dead. Another source, Huidekoper’s *Christ’s Mission to the Underworld*, could not be found in the B. H. Roberts Memorial Library, but it was apparently cited to bolster the LDS doctrine that Jesus opened the preaching of the gospel to the spirits of the dead.

Part four of Roberts’s *Outline of Ecclesiastical History*⁶ is titled “The Restoration of the Gospel.” This appears to be the main secondary source from which the material in this chapter derives. *History of the Church*, which B. H. Roberts edited and helped prepare for publication in 1902–12,⁷ provides the main primary source materials for this chapter.

NOTES

¹He refers the reader to Doctrine and Covenants 128:20 and *History of the Church* 1:40–42 and footnotes. See also Larry C. Porter, “Dating the Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood,” *Ensign* 9 (June 1979): 5–10; and Jae R. Ballif, “Melchizedek Priesthood: Restoration of,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:885–87.

²Orson Pratt, *Remarkable Visions* (Liverpool: R. James, 1848).

³Osborne John Peter Widtsoe, *The Restoration of the Gospel*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912).

⁴This series became the basis for Roberts’s *Comprehensive History of the Church*.

⁵“Epistle of Kallikrates,” trans. J. M. Witherow, *Improvement Era* 32 (September 1928): 899–909.

⁶B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902).

⁷Joseph Smith, Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971).