



Type: Magazine Article

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Source: *The Instructor*, Vol. 79, No. 5 (May 1944), pp. 211-216

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Conversions THROUGH THE BOOK OF MORMON

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VII. Dr. Robert Thomas Hill

Not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called."

That was said by Paul in reference to the Church of his time, but it holds equally of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (Joseph Smith, by the way, rendered the word "chosen" instead of "called," and this sounds more sensible, since literally *everyone* is "called.") The Apostle, please note, does not say that there were not *any* wise or mighty or noble attracted to the Church, but only "not many." For, as a matter of fact, he himself was an honorable exception to the statement. His writings are a clear proof of a highly trained, educated mind. In the Church of our time, also, there have been some "wise according to the flesh," though "not many," drawn to it—not many, that is, as compared to those who are "wise" according to another standard. And so, whenever a noted scholar embraces Mormonism, it is a subject of comment by insiders, but of wonder by his friends.

Why is it that the gospel, not only in our time, but in times past, also, finds little appeal to the learn-

ed, the aristocratic, or the worldly? One may venture a guess.

The scholar seeks certitude in factual data, in measurable events. He observes, he reasons, and he draws conclusions—all without any help from the outside. He learns to depend on himself. There is no faith involved in the process, except as he looks forward to what he conceives to be the inevitable result of his findings. But revealed religion, in its fundamentals at least, is a matter of authority. One is asked to believe something, to take it for granted, to exercise faith, to walk by expectation rather than by sight. Hence one who has formed the habit of thinking his way through difficulties finds it hard to believe that something is true which he has not proved to be so.

As for the aristocrat, he looks upon himself as exclusive, whereas revealed religion is democratic. In the Church (at least, theoretically) all men are equal before the truth and before God. The worldly-minded, of course, cannot reconcile their material conception of the universe and of life here and now with the spiritual conceptions of religion, and so they remain aloof from the Church. They, too, find it hard to *believe*.

In all three cases the penetrating insight of Jesus is applicable: "Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

The case of Robert Thomas Hill shows, not only the high hurdles which the scholar must take when he joins the Mormons, but also the manner in which humility and faith have to come into the heart. There is something suggestive of Paul in the incident.

Robert Thomas Hill was a Southerner by birth, having been born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1858. His father was Robert Thomas Hill, and his mother Catherine Van Dyke. It was not until he was twenty-eight years old, however, that Robert Thomas, Junior, was graduated with a college degree. In 1886 he received his B.S. from Cornell University. Of his life before this—where he lived and what education he received—we have now no means of knowing. It was when he was sixty-two years of age that he received his doctorate (LL.D.) at Baylor University, in Texas. Meantime he served as Assistant Paleontologist at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.; was married to Justina Robinson, of Ware, Massachusetts, though the couple do not appear to have left any descendants; had formed a connection with the United States Geological Survey, a connection which seems to have continued until 1921; accompanied Professor Alexander Agassiz, son of the famous teacher,

Jean Louis Agassiz, of Harvard University, on an expedition to West India and Central America; and held, meanwhile, too, a professorship of geology at the University of Texas, and lectured extensively at American colleges and universities.

A fellow of the American Geological Society, as well as a member of several other scientific bodies, Dr. Hill was the author of numerous books and pamphlets on various phases of geology. One of his last jobs was as an expert for the State of Texas in the Oklahoma-Texas boundary dispute, before the United States Supreme Court. He was apparently as widely read as he was widely traveled—a learned man and an accurate scholar.¹ Dr. Hill died in 1941.

At the time we first meet Dr. Hill for the purpose of this narrative, he was in Mexico City, across the border in Old Mexico. Being about to return to the United States, he sought out a book stall, at which he might buy something to read on the journey. On looking over the shelf of English books, he could, strangely enough, see but one volume. It was the Book of Mormon. Above it and below it and on both sides of it were other books, but this one seemed to stand out. It was as if all the others had been obliterated, so that he could not see them, much as an

¹Most of these facts have been taken from *Who's Who in America*, where Dr. Hill receives a considerable paragraph.

engraver rubs out objects in a picture which he does not wish to include in the finished engraving, so as to bring the one object out in the clear.

This fact, of itself, struck the attention of Dr. Hill.

He had, of course, heard of the Book of Mormon—as who has not? Indeed, he had even read about it. He had also read about Joseph Smith and the Mormons in general. But, singularly enough, as he now thought, what he had read and heard about the Book, the man, and the people was not for, but against them. He could not recall that he had even heard anything in their favor. And so his opinion of the Mormons and their faith was not at all complimentary to either. Now, however, as he stood there looking at this particular volume, there flashed through his mind the thought that he, a scientist, one who was supposed to withhold his judgment till he had regarded all the facts in the case, had not been fair to the Mormons and their religious beliefs. He had considered only the side put forth by their enemies.

Well, here, for perhaps the first time in his experience, was an opportunity to look at the facts from the Mormons' own point of view. Here was the Book of Mormon, the work in which they most believed, the foundation of their faith, their Bible. So he bought the book, with the intention of going through it on the journey to El Paso.

In those days—and in these days, too, for that matter—the train be-

tween Mexico City and El Paso took its time. Four or five tedious days, if nothing adverse happened, were required then to make the journey. Dr. Hill procured a berth so as to allow of both rest and time to read without interruption.

Dr. Hill was profoundly moved by what he read. The Book of Mormon, as the reader probably knows, professes to be the history of pre-Columbus America, an account of an extinct civilization, and Dr. Hill was a paleontologist; that is, one who studies "the forms of life existing in former geological periods, as represented by fossil animals and plants." He was concerned, also, with archeology, with ancient American civilizations. When this man and this book, therefore, came together under proper conditions, something was bound to happen.

For obviously Dr. Hill, when he took up the Nephite Record to read, had the open-mindedness which the book itself demands of its readers. He wanted to know, not perhaps whether "these things are true," but rather what were the beliefs of those who accept it as the word of God. He learned, of course, from the Introduction the claims made for the volume, that, in the original plates from which it was translated, it had been revealed to Joseph Smith by a "heavenly messenger."

As he read this strange work, his

²To A. William Lund for one, from whom I received most of the details from here on, in substance.

mind was illuminated. It was as if, he said later,² his physical berth on the sleeper were lighted up literally after the bulb had been turned off, so that he could see more clearly even than by its light. Anyone who has had a similar experience can understand the situation. The mind sees as it never did before. For the spirit clarifies the mind as nothing else can do. Matters that were obscure before in the scientist's mind now stood out boldly and clearly.

Although he had not, it would seem, begun his reading of the Book of Mormon with a question as to its truth or falsity in his mind, yet he came from the reading of it with a firm belief that the story of its origin is true, and this belief was confirmed by later conversations with the Apostle Anthony W. Ivins.

Just where, when, and under what circumstances he and Elder Ivins first met, cannot now be known for certain. It may have been on the train from Mexico City, for the Apostle often went to Mexico in those days, or it may even have been on the train on which Dr. Hill had been riding out of the Mexican capital, or, again, it may have been at El Paso or Salt Lake City, which Dr. Hill occasionally visited in the course of his travels. That does not matter. What does matter is that the two did actually meet at this particular moment, and, further, that no meeting could have been more fortuitous for the convert at this time.

Besides being an extraordinary

man, Anthony W. Ivins was deeply interested in the Book of Mormon, in the natives of the Americas, in geology and archeology, especially as these subjects bore on the American natives. And then, too, Elder Ivins was himself open-minded, not given to fanaticism on anything, least of all on religion, but sensible, scholarly, tolerant, and well informed.

Dr. Hill and the Apostle, therefore, got along famously. Together they explored the Book of Mormon in its relation to ancient America, as ancient America has become known to archeologists — a field where they were on common ground. They explored, too, the field of religion as it was related to this ancient Record.

The two appear to have met often after that. Whenever Dr. Hill passed through Salt Lake City, he called upon the Apostle, who entertained him at his home in the Eighteenth Ward. It was on one of these visits to the Intermountain town that Dr. Hill expressed a desire to be baptized. This was in August, 1911.

Elder Ivins called up his bishop, Thomas A. Clawson. Bishop Clawson, in turn, called up A. William Lund, of the Historian's Office, then a resident of the Eighteenth Ward, the four men repaired to the Tabernacle, where there was a baptismal font, and Dr. Hill was baptized by Elder Lund and confirmed immediately afterwards, Elder Ivins being mouth.

In the initiation of this scholar

into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is noteworthy that he recognized the fact that there is an intimate, one might even say an inevitable, connection between an acceptance of the Book of Mormon and an acceptance of the Church, which is founded partly on the Book of Mormon. The two stand or fall together.

If the Book of Mormon is a history and not a piece of fiction, then it follows that the story of the Angel Moroni, of the golden plates with writing on them, of the urim and thummim used in the translation, are true and real. But if, on the contrary, the Book of Mormon is the result of Joseph Smith's imagination (or any one else's, for that matter), then the entire story of the Angel, the plates, the "interpreters," and the divine element, are also imaginary. There is no escape from this alternative.

Dr. Hill believed the Book of Mormon to be a history, not fiction. And so he joined the Church. But Dr. Hill went further than that. Accepting the theory that it was a history, not fiction, he was led to accept also the other revelations to the Prophet—the one about God and Christ, those concerning John the Baptist and the three ancient Apostles, and others in the same class. These all tie together, and tie in with the visions of Moroni. They stand or fall together.

But if one accepts the visions of Joseph Smith, one must also accept the Church that grew out of those visions. The Church, too, must have been divinely set up. For it

is the instrument by which men are to be saved. Joseph Smith affirmed that through him the priesthood had been restored, with all its ancient powers and gifts and authority. And so the Church and the visions and the Book of Mormon stand or fall together.

Dr. Hill accepted all of these. He considered that God had illumined his mind through the Book of Mormon and its teachings and that it was He who had brought about a change in his heart and mind. The rest followed.

In the Salt Lake City of those years a discussion was going on that interested Dr. Hill very much. It revolved around the authenticity of the Book of Abraham, in the Pearl of Great Price, and was participated in by both Mormons and Gentiles there.

It is claimed for the Book of Abraham, as the reader may know, that it is a translation made by Joseph Smith from an ancient manuscript given to him by an antiquarian named Chandler. The manuscript, the Prophet said, contained the writings of Abraham, with some drawings.

The discussion was projected by Bishop Franklin S. Spaulding, of the Episcopal Church, whose residence was in Salt Lake City. It seems that he had written to some Egyptologists in Eastern cities, to obtain their opinion as to the character of the drawings and the correctness of the translations. These opinions, when he received them, he published, together with some explana-

tory matter, in a pamphlet. Then the controversial chips began to fly.

It was at this time that, one day, Dr. Hill had a conversation with Bishop Spaulding and a mutual friend, Dr. William Ellerbeck. The three, it appears, had known one another for some time, and had conversed before.

On this occasion the subject of the Book of Mormon came up for discussion, and Dr. Hill told his friends about some items which he had come upon in his archeological studies. Among these was the time of the appearance of the horse in America. Dr. Hill maintained that the horse, contrary to the popular view, was indigenous to America, and not, as the Bishop and his friend maintained, an importation by the Spaniards. (This was many years before the discovery of the horse,

the elephant, and other extinct animals in the LeBrea tar pits, near Los Angeles, California, many of which have since been mounted and are now to be seen in the Exposition Park Museum.)

Dr. Hill went further than this. He predicted that, as archeologists continued to uncover cities and ancient ruins, evidence of the truth of the Book of Mormon would accumulate until it would amount to absolute proof.

"Well," the Bishop exclaimed at the end of this archeological discourse, "you talk as you would if you were a Mormon!"

"I am a Mormon," was the simple reply. "I have just been baptized into the Church."

The astonishment of the two friends can better be imagined than described! —*Next one in July*



He Gives To Me

Merling D. Clyde

In prayer, I do not see God on His throne
And gravely ruling there from His high seat;
Instead, I see Him walking all alone
Above soft clouds that billow at His feet,—
A blanket formed between the earth and sky
To shield Him from our sight. Yet through this veil
No detail of the world escapes His eye;
His ear can hear each supplicating wail.

Omnipotent, His clarifying view
Will measure justice in the things we do.
Though burdened with the weight of all men's woe,
Each prayer of Faith will reach Him there. And so,
If I seek Him, my problems He will see.
The blessings I deserve He gives to me.