B.H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: In this article Madsen introduces B. H. Roberts and presents a synopsis of his rigorous life-time study of the Book of Mormon. Roberts approached the Book of Mormon from many different perspectives, all adding to his conviction that it was authentic scripture. The article explores these perspectives and suggests that B. H. Roberts's five-decade probing of the book was "shrewd," "ground-breaking, " and faith-promoting. Through Roberts the modern reader can come to understand the kind of challenge the Book of Mormon poses for an honest inquirer and how one can tiy to deal with that challenge.

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Truman G. Madsen

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explores these perspectives and suggests that B. H. Roberts's five-decade probing of the book was "shrewd," "ground-breaking," and faith-promoting. Through Roberts the modern reader can come to understand the kind of challenge the Book of Mormon poses for an honest inquirer and how one can try to deal with that challenge.

Introduction

By its own account, the Book of Mormon is for doubters. It announces on its title page a clear purpose for all the hard labor of preserving records: "To the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God." That statement presupposes that there would be serious and searing doubt in the world and that even religious readers, whatever their Messianic expectations, would not only raise questions about the historicity of this or that segment of the life of Jesus, but about the whole religious enterprise.

Whether that expectation was obvious in prior centuries or not, the fading religiosity of man is a contemporary fact.

Among readers who came to the Book of Mormon with hard, skeptical assumptions, B. H. Roberts[1] is notable. He was capacitated by temperament and equipped by study for penetrating analysis. Moreover, at many junctures of his life he had profound personal reasons and emotional and spiritual stresses which might have led a man of lesser integrity to discard wholesale his religious heritage. But on his other side was his capacity for constant, patient study. This he brought (for more than a half century) to the Book of Mormon as he did to his work in history, never letting go, never fully satisfied with what he had written or said, and never unwilling to consider afresh the latest spate of difficulties.

We have no autobiographical account of his own conversion to the Book of Mormon. But he does provide us with the makings of an outline: He accepted it with only surface acquain-

tance in his youth in Britain, as had his mother, as part of the total meaning of the "new dispensation" (his favorite phrase for the Restoration Movement). Prior to his becoming a missionary he had also had an intuitive or spiritual assurance in response to the very spirit of the book and its impact in his soul. In the mission field he was immediately subjected to the assault and battery of stereotyped hostility. And early on he found himself in public debate in Tennessee with a notorious Southern States figure, "Parson Alsup." For three days this man deluged the inexperienced elder with an exhaustive and bitter denunciation of the Book of Mormon. (He later learned that each of Parson Alsup's arguments had been borrowed whole cloth from Alexander Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger.*) From the stress of those three days, Elder Roberts emerged the victor in three senses: First, a responsive audience came and stayed to listen. Second, after a discussion of pre-Christian knowledge of Christ, Elder Roberts took the advantage and Parson Alsup refused to continue the debate. And third, within a short time he had baptized and confirmed into the Church more than sixty converts of the local citizenry.

This was not a mere passing episode but a preview of the rest of his life. Cumulatively, he worked to get a fair hearing for the book in two full volumes and some seventy articles, reviews, and tracts, and hundreds of sermons.

Aside from probing the book itself (one of his heroes, Orson Pratt, had read it countless times word by word to separate it into verses and cross-reference it), B. H. Roberts spent much library time in great centers and collections. As a missionary in England, for example, he went daily on a five-minute walk from the mission headquarters to the celebrated Liverpool Picton Library. There he made "an immense collection of notes" on evidences of American antiquities and archaeological works. At the other end of his life, during his five years as mission president in the Eastern States Mission from 1923 to 1928, he went on weekends, and sometimes at other times, to the New York Public Library and pursued further research on Book of Mormon antiquities.

The purpose of this article is to present a synopsis of what B. H. Roberts wrote and said about the Book of Mormon from ten different perspectives. Our samplings will corroborate the judgment of Hebraist Sidney B. Sperry and historian Hugh W. Nibley that his work, though not fully scientific or linguistic, was "shrewd" and that in basic outlines he was not only a ground-breaking pioneer but, in light of what followed, was ahead of his time.

1. Roberts as Circumstantial Analyst

In his considerations of the Book of Mormon, B. H. Roberts held that the strictest canons of confirmation—including strict, inductive methods—apply. The Book of Mormon, after all, is a public document that can be examined by anyone, faithful or faithless. It is shareable, and its claims can be checked against historical data. Examination of it is repeatable in the most concrete laboratory sense. Of course, at this level one can hope only for probabilities, but before one can be convinced that the book is authentic, he must be convinced that it is plausible and, before that, that it is possible.

Roberts was not himself "softened up" to the possibility of miracle. The Mormon understanding of miracles which he embraced repudiates the notion that they are a violation of law, natural or otherwise, or that they involve the logic of paradox. "Miracle" is the name of something extraordinary or beyond conventional explanation.[2] Roberts dealt extensively with what he called "external evidences" for the book. But that was preparatory to the other side of the equation, not what is the evidence for the Book of Mormon but *what is the Book of Mormon evidence for?* At a distance one may say the Book of Mormon story is impossible. Roberts's response has been reworded in our time: "If it happens, it must be possible." Here is a 531-page book (English edition). Start by reading it, and then move to the questions of its sources and its implications.

There was a boldness in Roberts's five-decade study of the book and in the fifteen hundred pages he set down about it.

> The Book of Mormon of necessity must submit to every test, to literary criticism, as well as to every other class of criticism; for our age is above all things critical, and especially critical of sacred literature, and we may not hope that the Book of Mormon will escape closest scrutiny; neither, indeed, is it desirable that it should escape.[3]

He came to symbolize a willingness, an almost reckless willingness, to consider the latest learned exegesis. He tried to stay abreast (mainly through biblical commentaries and the pages of the *Hibbert Journal*) of textual analysis and the contextual efforts of higher criticism. Though he tended to feel the contribution of such criticism was highly tenuous—hanging heavy weights on slender threads[4]—the personal implications were that his own roots went deeper. After some four decades of toil, he said: "For many years, after a rather rigid analysis, as I think, of the evidence bearing upon the truth of the Book of Mormon, I have reached, through some stress and struggle, too, an absolute conviction of its truth."[5]

In fact, in the quagmire of the struggle he became almost sanguine. Thus he could write in August 1905, "I do not believe the Book of Mormon can be assailed and overcome."[6] This was not because he assumed the faithful and credulous would refuse to abandon the book. It was because, regardless of the criteria brought to test it, and no matter how one defines evidence, the book would stand up as an authentic historical document.

Fifty years later the efforts of the counter-theorists (including the regalvanized Spaulding theory) have come full circle. All talk of a ghostwriter or ghostwriters has been discredited. And sociologist-historian Thomas O'Dea expresses the "common sense" conclusion that Joseph Smith himself wrote the book.[7] But the marvel of the product requires radical reappraisal of the alleged author. It is frequently said today, "Joseph Smith was a genius." Anyone who could produce (however one defines "produce") such an elaborate document would of course be a master, a multiple-talent genius in creative imagination and literary forms. He would also have to have the power of a "zeitgeist," and subliminal "cultural tendencies," and a super-

human grasp of the whole sweep of Middle Eastern and pre-Columbian American history.

And that is just the point: how could any genius or set of geniuses in the nineteenth century concoct a book that is filled with stunning details, now confirmable, of the ancient cultures it claims to represent? By the use of Occam's razor and David Hume's rule that one only credits a "miraculous" explanation if alternatives are more miraculous, the simplest and least miraculous explanation is Joseph Smith's: he translated an ancient record. It imposes what Roberts called "a greater tax on human credulity" to say Joseph Smith, or anyone in the nineteenth century, created it.[8]

As for the translation itself, Roberts argued that transmission of information through angelic ministrants and the use of the Urim and Thummim in translation is thoroughly biblical. Addressing himself to those who had no confidence whatever in the Bible, he went on to plead for an open mind with respect to man's ingenuity and the marvelous instruments that have come into his hands which make the Book of Mormon claims at least possible.[9]

2. Roberts as Historian

His study of American antiquities and his tracing of legends and mythology gave B. H. Roberts a disciplined caution. He knew that fallible memory and active imagination and the flux of purpose in telling and retelling could turn any authentic story into palpable fiction. He knew as well that in the midst of such oral traditions and folklore there are often kernels of truth. With the instincts of a courtroom attorney intent on cross-examination, he interviewed those who had firsthand knowledge of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. He lived in the midst of first-generation witnesses.

During his first mission to Iowa in 1884, he visited David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses, who said among other things, "Young man, if that book is not true nothing on God's earth is true." Then David Whitmer added that he had been cautioned on the revelatory day, "David, blessed is he that

endureth to the end." Roberts felt there was hidden warning in these words, for David Whitmer was the only one of the three witnesses who died outside the Church.[10]

Roberts lamented the fact that many encyclopedias claimed that each of the three witnesses later denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon. The constraint of evidence—some of it gathered by Elder Roberts—led many editors to retract and reverse that statement. Late in life Roberts himself made a biographical project out of the life of Oliver Cowdery, planning to present him as the paradigm of a man of "almosts," who came close to destiny but who finally was stripped of his gifts and leadership role. But in response to prayer Roberts became convinced that Oliver Cowdery had completed his mission and that his private estrangement from Joseph Smith added weight to his unrelenting witness of the Book of Mormon. Roberts threw his manuscript of Oliver Cowdery's "almost" achievements into the fire.[11] That the witnesses of the Book of Mormon held to their testimonies, especially in light of the turbulent circumstances of their lives and the many attempts to discredit them, was to Roberts heavy evidence indeed. He himself said their testimonies of the book were "unimpeached and unimpeachable."[12]

Then later in his official capacities as a General Authority and as an assistant Church Historian, B. H. Roberts had many additional interviews with other early participants in the Mormon drama—John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith, the Pratt brothers, and others, including Anson Call, Philo Dibble, Nathan Porter, and Edward Stevenson.

3. Roberts as Analyst of a "Translation"

B. H. Roberts was preoccupied with Joseph Smith's role as translator. One reason was that critics turned Joseph's phrase "by the gift and power of God" into a claim he never made, that of verbal inerrancy. Roberts wrote a whole treatise on these issues, concluding that Joseph Smith could not escape his own skin. Joseph's vocabulary and grammar are as clearly imposed on the book as are fingerprints on a coin. When Harold Glen

Clark asked President Roberts if the Book of Mormon would read differently had it been translated by someone else, B. H. Roberts replied, "Of course, not in substance and basic message but in modes of expression."[13] Although Joseph Smith affirmed he used a Urim and Thummim, the instrument did not do everything and the Prophet nothing. Roberts insisted that the translation process was neither so simple nor so easy a thing as has been supposed by both advocates and critics of the Prophet.[14] On the contrary, "brain sweat" was required, and preparation, and labor. Further, as an illustration that exact word-for-word translation of one language into another is impossible, Roberts presented examples from the Greek New Testament showing that the word *Master* used in the authorized version is a translation of six different Greek words all having different shades of meaning. *Judgment* stands for eight different Greek words.[15] He concluded, "Let us rid ourselves of the reproach of charging error, even though it be of forms of expression, unto God."[16] Elder Roberts hoped for the day when the President of the Church would authorize that the Book of Mormon be "made a classic in English . . . without changing the shade of a single idea or statement."[17] He did not live to see it become a classic in other translations.

4. Roberts as Advocate and Defender

In his systematic analysis of the Book of Mormon, volumes 2 and 3 of *New Witnesses for God* (he called it correctly "the fullest treatise on the Book of Mormon yet published"),[18] B. H. Roberts considered objections to the book and also counter-theories of its origin (including Alexander Campbell's, which Campbell later abandoned). Some of those objections included the following: awkward style and errors in grammar (Roberts answered they could be traced to the translator); passages which reflect King James terminology (the mental framework of young Joseph Smith); linguistic issues such as uniformity versus diversity in style (clearly several styles are demonstrable); variant readings of Isaiah in 2 Nephi (likely from a credible common source); apparent pre-Christian knowledge of the

gospel (Paul and New Testament writers presuppose that); the giving of the priesthood to others than the tribe of Levi (why not?); the birth of Jesus "at Jerusalem" (no, "in the land of" Jerusalem); Nephite knowledge of the "call of the Gentiles" (historical and prophetic); the alleged three days of darkness in the Western Hemisphere (not of the whole world); the unoriginality of the book (it should be true to Jewish understanding—but there are many surprises); alleged "modern" astronomy in the book (not really); geographical issues (plausible enough); questions arising from the Anthon transcript and its relationship in hieroglyphics and Mexican picture writing (wait for Egyptologists); alleged plagiarisms of historical and biblical stories (religious experience is not falsified by being repetitive); the absence of Book of Mormon names in native American languages (similar names); the building of the Nephite temple (a small temple built by a small colony); the mention of iron and steel and the horse among the Nephites (iron is defensible from other sources, the horse is problematic); the incredible Jaredite barges (not incredible); the marvels of the Liahona (there are historical analogies in the Bible); the unmanageable weight of the plates (heavy but not debilitating); and the unheard-of antics of a beheaded soldier named Shiz (there are other known cases).[19]

Roberts thought it significant that most of these objections involved a misreading or misrepresentation. Yet he also allowed that his own answers to certain anachronisms in the book were at that time less than satisfactory. That little or no evidence of some of the events or elements of the Book of Mormon could be discovered in 1900-1930 nonscriptural sources is hardly proof that the narrative is mistaken or implausible. In the spirit of a logician, he urged that negative knowledge—that something didn't happen—is much more difficult to prove than what did. Negative theory is less valuable than one trifle of positive evidence, with which the Book of Mormon is replete.

Contemporary scholars, far more specialized and better prepared with linguistic tools, have begun at the other end. By studying the Jewish-Arab cultures of the sixth century B.C. and earlier, and again the meso-American culture of the appropriate

later periods, they define "patternistic" themes and traits. The Book of Mormon can now be checked to see where it matches these contemporary findings. Hugh W. Nibley's *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* provides an Old World context, and John L. Sorenson's work concludes that the Book of Mormon is also a "meso-American codex" and pleads that scholars in anthropology and archaeology apply the book to their cultural researches even though they are hesitant about its claim to be a sacred text.[20] Meantime, new discoveries of ancient writings reaching into the same periods provide scholars with tighter controls on the claims of the book. The "coincidences" continue to pile up.

5. Roberts as Wisdom Seeker

B. H. Roberts saw the Book of Mormon as a well of aphorisms. He listed more trenchant sayings from the Book of Mormon than from any source other than the Bible. These sayings, he believed, were comparable in their edge and insight not only to biblical but also to Hindu and Chinese classics. The following were among those he wrote into his own notebook and memorized:

> Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy (2 Nephi 2:25).
>
> It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things (2 Nephi 2:11).
>
> When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God (Mosiah 2:17).
>
> Wickedness never was happiness (Alma 41:10).
>
> To be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God (2 Nephi 9:29).
>
> It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do (2 Nephi 25:23).
>
> See that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love (Alma 38:12).
>
> What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am (3 Nephi 27:27).
>
> I give unto men weaknesses that they may be humble; . . . for if they humble themselves before me, and have

> faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them (Ether 12:27).
> Despair cometh because of iniquity (Moroni 10:22).
> Without faith there cannot be any hope (Moroni 7:42).
> Charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him (Moroni 7:47).
> The laborer in Zion shall labor for Zion; for if they labor for money they shall perish (2 Nephi 26:31).[21]

Roberts elsewhere warned against a tendency to disparage such phrases which come quickly to the tongue even before their full significance is apparent to the mind—a tendency toward "air-sniffing" contempt for the moral wisdom of the ages. Beauty and value remain even in the most threadbare of such counsels.[22] Who can calculate the power of the repetitive phrase in the Jewish Passover seder, "Next year in Jerusalem"? Or the two words that have grown out of the holocaust of the Jews, "Never again!"? B. H. Roberts felt comparable impact in such phrases as, "Oh remember, remember my son," "wickedness never was happiness."

6. Roberts as Creative Writer

From college days and in the wake of his duties as an editor and journalist with the *Millennial Star* and the *Salt Lake Herald*, B. H. Roberts aspired to creative writing. He had already demonstrated narrative gifts and a dramatic sense. Short stories, plays, and even a historical novel were on his agenda of things to do. As a start, he wrote stories on Moroni, a sketch of a "Nephite Republic," and a fictionalized and heightened account of the life of Alma's son Corianton, a tale of sneaking indulgence and remorse and renewal.[23] The story was adapted by O. U. Bean into a play. It is not surprising that it enjoyed local acclaim, but it also found its way from the Salt Lake Theater to Broadway. Though it is a moralizing story, the response to it, for Roberts, pointed to the dramatic possibilities of this and a hundred segments of the Book of Mormon. Not only did he feel that Book of Mormon characters have flesh-

and-blood counterparts in our own day and in our own interior lives, but he also thought it utterly inept to speak of the Book of Mormon as "antiquated" or of its idealisms and descriptions of barbarism as "unreal." He saw it as a mine of sinewy spiritual inspiration. He visualized the book of 3 Nephi as a pageant, a magnificent Easter vision which could not be matched anywhere in the world of literature.[24] For Roberts, one might read 3 Nephi from no other motives than those he brings to Homer or Beowulf.

As the Church centennial approached (1930), he dreamed of a major motion picture with a script built upon one or more of the epic civilizations portrayed in the book. It was not to be.

Although he did not live to realize it, B. H. Roberts, as president of the Eastern States Mission, was the "Elias" of the now nationally known Palmyra Pageant. It was he who set up an elaborate celebration on 23 September 1923 on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the receiving of the plates from the Hill Cumorah. He had prepared five careful addresses but because of illness delivered only two. The press described his Hill Cumorah address as "like some graphic panorama of the past," like a "Norse saga," and President Roberts wrote home that this one paragraph justified his entire effort.[25] Also through his efforts, the Church acquired the Hill Cumorah, the Joseph Smith Farm, the Sacred Grove, and the Whitmer Farm.[26] "I rejoice that we have these places," he said. He was pleased with the call to New York in the first place because it was the territory of "the early scenes of the Prophet's life, the first vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the Hill Cumorah, etc.," which "naturally would endear this section of the country to the mind and heart of Elder Roberts."[27] Several articles grew out of the five years he spent there.[28]

7. Roberts as Doctrinal Teacher

B. H. Roberts was more perceptive than many who tend to read traditional concepts into Book of Mormon verses. The absence of many of the traditional religious doctrines impressed him. Convinced that this book grew out of ancient sectaries of

Judaism and from the firsthand contact of a whole community with the resurrected Christ, he felt these absences were significant. For instance, in the Book of Mormon there is no doctrine of ex nihilo creation, nor of original sin, nor of a triune hypostatic God, nor of divine immateriality, nor of faith alone, nor of the all-sufficiency or only-sufficiency of the Bible, nor of the priesthood of all believers, nor of predestination, nor of total depravity. For Roberts, these were later "Christian" doctrines because none of them could be legitimately defended from the Bible itself.

As to the "originality of the Book of Mormon,"[29] Roberts there found doctrines exceeding the native intelligence of Joseph Smith, and his associates, and indeed the combined intelligence and learning of the nineteenth century. Among these truths were the definition of truth itself (Jacob 4:13); the doctrine of opposite existences (2 Nephi 2); the doctrine (with cosmological implications) that the universe splits into two categories, "things to act and things to be acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:14); a foundation for an unqualified affirmation of man's agency (2 Nephi 2:27, 10:23; Alma 61:21); a doctrine of the fall of Adam as instrumental to a higher good (2 Nephi 2:10-11, 15; Alma 42:16-17); a doctrine of the nature of evil as "among the eternal things"—"as eternal as good; as eternal as law; as eternal as the agency of intelligence"[30] (2 Nephi 2:17; Jacob 5:59; Alma 41:13) and thus a "master stroke" in the solution of the classical problem of theodicy[31] (how can a God of power be responsible for evil and the devil?) (2 Nephi 2:15-25); and a doctrine of the purpose of man's existence (2 Nephi 2:25). Here he contrasts the classical catechisms, confessions, and creeds of the major Christian and Jewish faiths. He formulates this doctrine from the words of Lehi as follows: "Earth life became essential to intelligences—Adam fell that this earth life might be realized. The purpose of man's earth life is that he might have joy. The purpose of the gospel is to bring to pass that joy."[32]

In his fourth yearbook of *The Seventy's Course in Theology* on the Atonement, Roberts concluded that the Book of Mormon teaching is unique on the role of Christ, that the balance of justice and mercy is the eternal foundation of the

meaning and necessity and power of the atonement of Jesus Christ:

> [This] is a doctrine, in modern times, peculiar to "Mormonism"; or, to speak more accurately, to the New Dispensation of the Gospel revealed to Joseph Smith; and is derived almost wholly from the teachings of the Book of Mormon.[33]

In its account of the free and complete redemption of little children and the redemption of those who die without the law, he wrote, the Book of Mormon is also patently clear. In fact, having compared the Book of Mormon teaching with classical "soteriology" in Anselm, Thomas, Augustine, Calvin, and Luther, B. H. Roberts concluded that nowhere else in all Christian literature is such mighty understanding of the Christ presented. Accepted as a "fifth Gospel" it would "put to silence several great controversies."[34]

Above all, he "rejoiced exceedingly" to show that the Book of Mormon does not simply affirm that Jesus is the Christ but that it clarifies what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. In contrast to those who have held that Mormonism denies or qualifies the deity of Jesus Christ, Roberts held that the Book of Mormon is solid testimony to the contrary. Therein is revealed that Christ is the complete revelation of the one divine nature, the express image of the Father, and that in nature and attributes the Father is exactly like the Son. It is in that sense that Mormons are (and in another sense are not) monotheists. "There is only one God-nature."[35] When intelligences in the universe fulfill the will of God and receive of his fulness, they too become "harmonized" and participate in that God-nature. Christ was the first who by his life and sacrificial death reflected and revealed "all of Him!—God revealed in all His fulness."[36] In the late 1920s Elder Roberts convinced the leadership of the youth organizations of the Church to set up a banner-slogan: "We stand for absolute faith in the eternal God, revealed in Jesus Christ."[37] And in his own sermons he utilized the tract he had written while president of the Eastern States Mission in the series of four tracts, "Why 'Mormonism'?"

> Mormonism is here to be, through the Book of Mormon, a witness to the Deity [more than to the divinity] of Jesus Christ: "to the convincing of the Jews and Gentiles that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting HIMSELF to all nations."[38]

8. ROBERTS AS DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

B. H. Roberts found and in many cases anticipated objections and reductive approaches to the book. He was known to turn the tables on young Mormon missionaries and represent "the case against" with crisp skill, pushing points of vulnerability that tested their mettle. He warned them against superficial response. Most of his colleagues disapproved of such confrontations, but Roberts would say, "You will have a good experience. It will open your eyes and deepen your understanding."[39]

On 4 and 5 January 1922, B. H. Roberts made an oral presentation before the General Authorities concerning what some critics claimed were anachronisms in the Book of Mormon —the mention of horses, of cimeters or swords, and of silk. These were troublesome to him as well as to the critics. He also presented a lengthy analysis of a tougher problem still—the variety of language dialects in Central and South America, more varied than the time period claimed by the Book of Mormon could account for. The meetings lasted for ten hours on the first day and through the whole day and evening of the second. Elder James E. Talmage of the Council of the Twelve Apostles recorded that he and others were asked to help Elder Roberts prepare answers, though none were clearly on the horizon. Elder Talmage, nevertheless, predicted in his journal that the Book of Mormon would be vindicated.[40]

Later, in March of 1922, Roberts prepared a draft of a written report to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. It included a further discussion of the linguistic problems and other points as well. The study of such books as those of Josiah Priest, Ethan Smith, and others led him to examine such questions as: What literary and historical speculations were abroad in the nineteenth century? Could Joseph Smith

have absorbed them in his youth and could these influences have provided the ground plan for such a work as the Book of Mormon? Did Joseph Smith have a mind "sufficiently creative" to have written it? And what internal problems and parallels within the Book of Mormon called for explanation? In confronting such questions Roberts prepared a series of "parallels" with Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews;* a summary of this analysis excerpted passages from Ethan Smith's work and lined them up in columns with comparable ideas in the Book of Mormon.[41] Examination of such questions was contained in a typewritten manuscript entitled "Book of Mormon Study."[42]

About this particular study, certain points must be kept in mind if it is not to be gravely misunderstood. First, it was not intended for general dissemination but was to be presented to the General Authorities to identify for them certain criticisms that might be made against the Book of Mormon. In his 1923 letter, Roberts wrote:

> Let me say once and for all, so as to avoid what might otherwise call for repeated explanation, that what is herein set forth does not represent any conclusions of mine. This report [is] . . . for the information of those who ought to know everything about it *pro and con,* as well that which has been produced against it as that which may be produced against it. I am taking the position that our faith is not only unshaken but unshakeable in the Book of Mormon, and therefore we can look without fear upon all that can be said against it.[43]

It is not clear how much of this typewritten report was actually submitted to the First Presidency and the Twelve, but it is clear that it was written for them.

In 1932 Roberts wrote to a missionary who had heard rumors of his work: "I had written it for presentation to the Twelve and the Presidency, not for publication. But I suspended the submission of it until I returned home, but I have not yet succeeded in making the presentation of it."[44]

Second, the report was not intended to be balanced. A kind of lawyer's brief of one side of a case written to stimulate discussion in preparation of the defense of a work already accepted

as true, the manuscript was anything but a careful presentation of Roberts's thoughts about the Book of Mormon or of his own convictions.

Third, many of the perceived problems are no longer problems. Roberts himself soon came to realize that the peoples of the Book of Mormon do not represent the only migration that inhabited the Western Hemisphere. So the problem of linguistic variation dissolved. Later scholars would find evidence of cimeters, of silk, and of horses.[45]

Roberts said in 1933 that he had concluded Ethan Smith played no part in the formation of the Book of Mormon.[46] Appreciative of irony, he might well have smiled at the sequel. After his death, ill-wishers published the "parallels" of the book without Elder Roberts's cover-letter disclaimer.[47] Others have gleefully recited other "problems" as he presented them, seemingly unaware that they were reflecting neither Roberts's own considered conclusions nor the current state of research. Fawn Brodie wrote in her biography of Joseph Smith that *View of the Hebrews* "may" have given Joseph Smith the idea of writing the book. While conceding that it "may never be proved" that Joseph ever saw *View of the Hebrews*, she was confident that "the striking parallelisms between the two books hardly leave a case for mere coincidence."[48] So doing, she unwittingly provided the criteria that validates the Book of Mormon. The "striking parallelisms" between the Book of Mormon and its own claimed historical matrix are far more striking, indeed destroying the case for "mere coincidence," while such genuine historical parallels do not exist for Ethan Smith's speculative treatise. Before his death in 1933, Roberts had concluded that the central claims of Joseph Smith and Ethan Smith are not only independent but incompatible.

Roberts felt he had established beyond doubt that there is enough independent evidence for pre-Columbian, Jewish, or Hebraic influence on native American races to make the Book of Mormon claims at least credible. The evidence was accumulating rapidly in the last decade of Elder Roberts's life (it has been an avalanche since), so much so that he told fellow-historian Preston Nibley in 1930 that he wished to call in his

New Witnesses volumes and start over.[49] To missionary associates he confided that he hoped to visit Central and South America and there examine firsthand the remnants of ancient middle-American peoples. Most of his work, he admitted, had been as a "compiler," heavily dependent on secondary sources for his conclusions. Age and declining health dissolved this hope ("How our visions vanish as time rushes upon them," he wrote in the late 1920s).[50]

Teachers who have used the "Devil's Advocate" approach to stimulate thought among their students, lawyers who in preparation of their cases have brought up what they consider the points likely to be made by their worthy opponents—all such people will recognize the unfairness of taking such statements out of context and offering them as their own mature, balanced conclusions. For ill-wishers to resurrect Roberts's similar "Devil's Advocate" probings is not a service to scholarship, for they are manifestly dated. And it is a travesty to take such working papers as a fair statement of B. H. Roberts's own appraisal of the Book of Mormon, for, as this paper abundantly demonstrates, his conviction of its truth was unshaken and frequently expressed down to the time of his death.

9. Roberts as One Spiritually Athirst

In Roberts's mind and heart the Book of Mormon was "precious withal,"[51] and one who began with faith could later be edified by what Elder Roberts called an intellectual testimony of its truths. Or one could begin with the intellect and end with an edifying faith in the personalities behind it. During his mature life he went back and forth between the two, equally excited by the feelings of discovery. To intimates, on more than one occasion, he quoted Brigham Young's statement "that no man had yet so much as heard of the Book of Mormon but what the Spirit of the Lord whispered quietly to his soul that the book was true."[52] Though renowned for his gifts as a speaker, B. H. Roberts agonized over the fact that he could never communicate the intensity, the power, the consuming white light that seemed to him to shine through the book.

In April 1928 on only one of thirty occasions when he used the Tabernacle pulpit on this subject, he said after reading of the ancient Nephites crying "Hosanna" in the presence of Christ:

> Now, tell me in what Church or cathedral in the world, in what sacred grove, in what place among the habitations of men will be found a more glorious Easter vision of the Christ than this? And the world would have lost this if it had not been for the Book of Mormon coming forth and there is a hundred more such glorious things that have come to the world in that book to enlighten the children of men.[53]

He closed with a prayer, for on this level the paralytic influence of analysis gave way to faith and its fulfillment. It was the praise of God that shone in him as he sang his song of praise.

By 1930, Roberts had polished his two major works—the six-volume *Comprehensive History of The Church* and his three-volume manuscript, "The Truth, the Way, the Life." His chapter on the Book of Mormon in the *History* is modified only slightly from the conclusions drawn in his *New Witnesses* books. But two chapters on Christ in the final volume of his doctrinal treatise include a more detailed exegesis of 3 Nephi and especially of the teachings of the Christ in their ethical and social bearing. He provided further insight into his assertion that the Book of Mormon "intensifies" the New Testament sermons of Jesus and demands a higher and richer relationship with Christ as Christ (not just Jesus as teacher). This was the absolute preface to a higher mode of personal and social sanctity and righteousness.[54]

At the 1930 centennial celebration, in summarizing the work of the first century and anticipating the beginning of the second, Roberts spoke in the idiom of revelation:

> Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for God hath spoken. . . . The Record of Joseph in the hands of Ephraim, the Book of Mormon, has been revealed and translated by the power of God, and supplies the world with a new witness for the Christ, and the truth and the fulness of the Gospel.[55]

10. Roberts as Ideological Prophet

B. H. Roberts did not enjoy being cast in the role of prophet. But he was confident in the triumph of ideas. "If you regard us from the viewpoint of learning and philosophy, we cut no great figure," he said in his mid-life. Yet Mormonism is "essentially a religion for intellectual men."[56] He believed that it would appeal, once seen clearly, to the highest intelligences of the earth:

> I am convinced that when men of intelligence can be brought to the point of being sufficiently humble to read again the Book of Mormon, and to take into account the high purposes for which it was written . . . and will stop sneering at such human elements as may be in it, and will examine once more its teachings upon the great theme of salvation through the atonement of the Christ, they can indeed find wisdom and philosophy and truth in its doctrines.[57]

The book, he predicted, would have gathering and unifying power, not only for the Jewish and Christian world but for all. It would come to "fix the world's standards of philosophical thought and ethical action in ages yet unborn."[58] "Oh, what the world would have lost, if the Book of Mormon had not been brought forth!" he said in April 1928.[59]

In 1933, in his final discourse—titled "God"—B. H. Roberts said again that Joseph Smith received commandments from God "which inspired him" and gave him power from on high to translate the Book of Mormon which, with subsequent revelations, "brought forth a development of the truth that surpasses all revealed truth of former dispensations."[60] He had earlier said the book would come to be viewed as "the greatest literary event of the world since the writings of the decalogue by the finger of God or the publication of the testimony in the New Testament that Jesus is the Christ."[61]

He also said: "We who accept it as a revelation from God have every reason to believe that it will endure every test; and the more thoroughly it is investigated, the greater shall be its ultimate triumph."[62]

He once pointed out a striking prophecy in the Book of Mormon about itself. Nephi records, "There shall be many which shall believe the words which are written; and they shall carry them forth unto the remnant of our seed" (2 Nephi 30:3). How many is "many"? Roberts knew well that a person can believe the Bible, at least in an attenuated sense, without believing the Book of Mormon. But one cannot believe the Book of Mormon without also believing the Bible. The same Nephi also predicts that "other books" will come forth to convince Jew and Gentile "upon all the face of the earth, that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true" (1 Nephi 13:39). The Book of Mormon and the other books yet to come will not replace the Bible. But the Bible will be reinstated in a greater fulness of splendor and clarity than it has enjoyed in all prior centuries.

B. H. Roberts's ten approaches to the Book of Mormon assured and reassured him that it was authentic scripture. And he died with this faith: The Book of Mormon will not convert the world to a small and encrusted sect called Mormonism, for Mormonism is to become a world movement. The Book of Mormon will help reconvert Christians, and eventually all the family of man, to Christ.

NOTES

1. B. H. Roberts, author of the *Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* and editor of the *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, was one of the Seven Presidents of the First Quorum of the Seventy from 1888 until his death in 1933.

2. See B. H. Roberts, "'Miracles' Part of the Divine Economy," *The Seventy's Course in Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911), 4:79.

3. B. H. Roberts, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 9 (April 1906):435-36.

4. See B. H. Roberts, "Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 14 (June 1911):668. A more precise account of the Isaiah problem by B. H. Roberts is printed in the *Improvement Era* 12 (July 1909): 681-89 under the title "An Objection to the Book of Mormon Answered."

5. Roberts, "Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon," p. 667.

6. B. H. Roberts, "Our Work Review of the New Manual," *Improvement Era* 8 (August 1905):784.

7. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 24, 30-37.

8. B. H. Roberts, "The Probability of Joseph Smith's Story," *Improvement Era* 7 (March 1904):321-31 and (April 1904):417-32; B. H. Roberts, "The Relative Tax on Human Credulity Between Ancient and Modern Dispensations of the Christian Religion," Salt Lake Tabernacle address, 21 October 1924.

9. Roberts, "The Probability of Joseph Smith's Story," pp. 321-31.

10. Diary of J. Orvall Ellsworth, 23 September 1923. Ellsworth was a Ph.D. student in economics at Cornell University at this time. See also B. H. Roberts's account of his interview with David Whitmer, *Conference Report of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, October 1926, p. 126.

11. Recollections of Georgia Roberts Maury, a daughter of B. H. Roberts, in an interview with the author, 1966.

12. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1909), 2:278. Richard L. Anderson has dealt thoroughly with this subject. See "Oliver Cowdery's Non-Mormon Reputation," *Improvement Era* 71 (August 1968):18-26; "Martin Harris: The Honorable New York Farmer," *Improvement Era* 72 (February 1969):18-21; "David Whitmer: The Independent Missouri Businessman," *Improvement Era* 72 (April 1969):74-81; "Five Who Handled the Plates," *Improvement Era* 72 (July 1969):38-47.

13. Harold Glen Clark to Truman G. Madsen, 25 April 1966, in possession of the author. Harold Glen Clark served under B. H. Roberts in the Eastern States Mission and asked this question during a mission school session in Brooklyn.

14. B. H. Roberts, "Bible Quotations in the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 7 (January 1904):191-96.

15. B. H. Roberts, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 9 (May 1906):544-53.

16. Ibid., p. 549.

17. See B. H. Roberts, YMMIA Manual, 1903-1904, "The Book of Mormon, Part 1," *New Witnesses for God*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: General Board of the YMMIA, 1903), chap. 7, pp. 106-21.

18. B. H. Roberts to Charles W. Nibley, 10 June 1908, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as Church Archives.

19. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3:407-557.

20. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, [1952]; John L. Sorenson, *The Book of Mormon as a Meso-American Codex* (Provo, Utah: Society for early Historical Archaeology, 1977) see also Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976).

21. "Bible Companion" and Miscellaneous Notes compiled by B. H. Roberts during World War I when he was a chaplain, Church Archives. (See also Roberts, *Conference Report*, April 1906, p. 17, and April 1928, p. 108.)

22. B. H. Roberts, "A Nephite's Commandments to His Three Sons: Corianton," part 3, *Improvement Era* 3 (August 1900):760-69, and part 4 (September 1900):835-43.

23. B. H. Roberts, "Corianton, a Nephite Story," *Contributor* 10 (March-July 1889):171, 206, 245, 286, 324. Later published as *Corianton, a Nephite Story* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1902).

24. Roberts, *Conference Report*, April 1928, p. 112.

25. The paragraph was in the *Rochester Herald* (New York), 22 September 1923. (See also Roberts, *Conference Report*, October 1923, p. 90, and B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. [Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1957], 6:524.)

26. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 6:525-26.

27. B. H. Roberts, Biographical Notes, dictated in 1933, typescript, in possession of the author, p. 217.

28. See, for example, B. H. Roberts, "Ramah-Cumorah in the Land of Ripliancum," *Deseret News*, 3 March 1928, and "God the Father's Purposes in Creation," *Improvement Era* 29 (January 1926):230-37.

29. Roberts, "Originality of the Book of Mormon," *New Witnesses for God*, 3:166-219; cf. B. H. Roberts, "Originality of the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 8 (September 1905):801-15 and (October 1905):882-902.

30. "Originality of the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 8 (September 1905):8-10. See also Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3:227.

31. B. H. Roberts, "A Master Stroke of Philosophy in the Book of Mormon," *Deseret News*, 16 June 1928. See reply by J. H. Paul, 23 June 1928. See also B. H. Roberts, "The Immortality of Man," *Improvement Era* 10 (April 1907):401-23; "Opposite Existences," *New Witnesses for God*, 3:219-27; and *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4th Yearbook, lessons 6-8, pp. 28-46.

32. Roberts, "Originality of the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 8 (October 1905):900. See also pp. 801-15 and 882-902.

33. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:113-14. He refers to major doctrinal sections of the Book of Mormon—2 Nephi 2; Alma 12, 34, and 42; and Mormon 9.

34. Roberts, *Conference Report*, April 1904, p. 16.

35. His most mature statement is in "God," *Discourses of B. H. Roberts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1948), pp. 79-105; cf. Roberts, *Conference Report*, April 1924, pp. 76-80. He speaks of the Book of Mormon as an instrument to "stem the tide of unbelief" (p. 79) and establish the deity of Jesus Christ (p. 80).

36. B. H. Roberts, Subject Outline Book, 1924, MS, pp. 1-2, Church Archives.

37. Ibid., p. 8.

38. B. H. Roberts, *Handbook of the Restoration*, 1st ed. (Independence, Mo.: Zions Printing and Publishing Company, 1944), p. 318. See also pp. 318-42.

39. Oral History Recordings of Dr. John T. Emmett, 16 December 1967, p. 5. Elder Emmett was secretary to B. H. Roberts in the Eastern States Mission. Transcript in possession of the author.

40. Journals of James E. Talmage, 4 and 5 January 1922, Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo. I am indebted to Sterling Albrecht for these references.

41. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews*, Photomechanical Reprints, and "Parallels by Mormon Historian B. H. Roberts" (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilms, n.d.).

42. The original is in the possession of the Roberts family. A xerox copy of that original has been placed in the Marriott Library at the University of Utah.

43. B. H. Roberts to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, March 1923.

44. B. H. Roberts to Elizabeth Skolfield, 12 March 1932, in possession of John Noble Henchley.

45. Nibley, "Steel, Glass and Silk," *Lehi in the Desert*, pp. 210-16; cf. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1964), pp. 64-65. See also Milton R. Hunter, "Chichén Itza Horse," *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1956), pp. 1-10; and "Archaeology and the Book of Mormon: Horses in Ancient America," part 6, *Improvement Era* 58 (October 1955):724-40, and part 7 (December 1955):898-99, 972-77.

46. As reported to the author in a 1978 conversation with Jack Christensen, who visited Roberts shortly before his death. Christensen had earlier provided Roberts with both the first and second editions of Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.

47. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews*, Photomechanical Reprints, and "Parallels by Mormon Historian B. H. Roberts." "It would seem to indicate that B. H. Roberts had lost his faith in the Book of Mormon" (Introduction, p. 1).

48. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), pp. 46-48.

49. Preston Nibley in conversation with the author, 1960.

50. B. H. Roberts to Elizabeth Skolfield, 23 April 1928, in possession of John Noble Henchley.

51. Roberts, *Conference Report*, April 1911, p. 58.

52. See Roberts, *Conference Report*, October 1905, pp. 44-45.

53. Roberts, *Conference Report*, April 1928, p. 112.

54. B. H. Roberts, "The Truth, the Way, the Life," vol. 3, chaps. 50, 51, and 52, MS, Church Archives.

55. Roberts, *Conference Report*, April 1930, p. 47.

56. Ibid., April 1911, pp. 57-59.

57. Ibid., pp. 59-60.

58. Ibid., October 1906, p. 65.

59. Ibid., April 1928, p. 107.

60. B. H. Roberts, *Discourses of B. H. Roberts*, p. 105.

61. Roberts, *Conference Report*, October 1923, p. 91.

62. Roberts, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon," p. 436.