



Type: Magazine Article

The Spirit of the Book of Mormon

Author(s): B.H. Roberts

Source: *The Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star*, Vol. LXVII, No. 20

(18 May 1905), pp. 305–309

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

Abstract: Describes the uplifting, enlightening, and inspirational aspects of the Book of Mormon.

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS'
MILLENNIAL STAR.

[ESTABLISHED 1840.]

"Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the will of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams."—I SAM. 15: 22.

No. 20, Vol. LXVII.

Thursday, May 18, 1905.

Price One Penny.

THE SPIRIT OF THE BOOK OF MORMON.

BY ELDER B. H. ROBERTS.

"I CAN no more remember the books I have read than the meals I have eaten," says Emerson, "but they have made me." In this way the American philosopher recognizes the simple truth that the reading of books has something to do with the making of a man—that they affect the mind. A book has a spirit as distinctly as a painting or a piece of sculpture has "feeling"—of course I mean a real work of art, into which something from the soul of the artist has passed. The best thing about a painting or piece of sculpture is said to be that which cannot be described; so also the best part of a book is the spirit of it, which may not always be describable, and that elusive, mysterious quality we call its spirit may arise from something quite apart from its rhetoric, or logic, or diction. It may be even as the voice of God: not in the strong wind, that rends the mountains and breaks in pieces the rocks before the Lord; not in the earthquake; nor in the fire; but in the still, small voice which follows the wind and earthquake and fire. (I Kings: xix). So with a book: its spirit may owe its existence to its simple truth—to the spirit of truth in them that made it.

"Do you ever think," said a writer in one of our popular magazines—"Do you ever think what is the effect of a book on your mind? . . . Is your mind purer for it, or clearer? Has it filled your mind with good or bad images? Has it raised your standard or lowered it? . . . Every book you read and understand affects you for better or worse. It has some effect upon you, and if you are sane you are bound to find what that is."

In common with all books, the Book of Mormon has its spirit, produces its effects upon the minds of men; and as it claims to be a work originally written and also translated through the inspiration of God, and deals primarily with sacred things, it is to be expected that the spirit of this book will have not only a good, but even a divine influence; that it will be of a faith-promoting, doubt-dispersing, comfort-bringing character. Its effect upon the minds of men, therefore, may be another test of its claims to a divine origin; and to that test I now submit it.

In his work entitled, "My First Mission," the late President George Q. Cannon makes the following statement respecting the influence exerted over his spirit by reading the Book of Mormon under the trying conditions in which he was placed while serving as a missionary in the Hawaiian Islands:

"Some of my readers may be placed in circumstances similar to those which surrounded me a part of the time on the Sandwich Islands; and it may be profitable to tell them how I kept from losing courage and becoming home-sick. My love for home is naturally very strong. For the first year after I left home I could scarcely think about it without my feelings getting the better of me. But here I was in a distant land, among a people whose language and habits were strange to me. Their very food was foreign to me, and unlike anything I had ever before seen or tasted. I was much of the time separated from my companions, the Elders. Until I mastered the language and commenced preaching and baptizing the people, I was indeed a stranger among them.

"Before I commenced holding regular meetings, I had plenty of time for meditation, to review all the events of my short life, and to think of the beloved home from which I was so far separated. It was then I found the value of the Book of Mormon. It was a book which I always loved. If I felt inclined to be lonely, to be low spirited, or home-sick, I had only to turn to its sacred pages to receive consolation, new strength, and a rich outpouring of the Spirit. Scarcely a page that did not contain encouragement for such as I was. The salvation of man was the great theme upon which its writers dwelt, and for this they were willing to undergo every privation and make every sacrifice.

"What were my petty difficulties compared with those afflictions which they had to endure? If I expected to share the glory for which they contended, I could see that I must labor in the same spirit. If the sons of King Mosiah could relinquish their high estate, and go forth among the degraded Lamanites to labor as they did, should not I labor with patience and devoted zeal for the salvation of these poor islanders, heirs of the same promise?

"Let me recommend this book, therefore, to young and old, if they need comfort and encouragement. Especially can I recommend it to those who are away from home on missions. No man can read it, partake of its spirit, and obey its teachings, without being filled with a deep love for the souls of men and a burning zeal to do all in his power to save them."

In the experience and sentiments expressed in the foregoing passage, Elder Cannon but voices the experience and sentiments of very many Latter-day Saints, including thousands of missionaries who have felt all that he has described with reference to the effects of the Book of Mormon upon his spirit.

The experiences of this host of believers may be properly appealed to as evidence for the effect of the book upon their minds; and I cannot believe but that it is also an evidence of its truth. Men have gone to the Book of Mormon in despondency, and have come away cheered; they have gone to it in sorrow, and have come away comforted; they have gone to it at times when overwhelmed for a moment by the mists which the speculations of men sometimes throw over truth, and have come away from it enlightened—with faith, and hope, and charity renewed. It created for them a firmer faith in God. In the presence of its spirit doubt took wings. Its moral and spiritual standards they find to be the highest and noblest. Indeed, so perfect is its morality that no one has yet been able to bring a complaint against it on the ground of moral defect; and it was doubtless a consciousness of its moral excellence that led the Prophet Joseph Smith himself to declare, on one occasion, when in council with the Twelve Apostles, that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and that a man could get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than by following any other book whatsoever. If in its historical parts believers find it dealing with events that exhibit selfishness, unholy ambitions, and all the follies and crimes common to all times and all nations and races of men, they never find its treatment of such things of the kind that blazons evil deeds, or consecrates crime; much less of the kind that cannonizes the vicious. In its pages they see things in their true light. There is no shuffling, but evil deeds receive their proper condemnation in the simple, straightforward language of its inspired men. For believers the Book of Mormon differs from the books of men as the works of nature differ from the works of men. And with what relief men of deep spiritual natures turn from the works of men to the works of nature! From artistic parks, to nature's jumbled wilderness; from well kept gardens to desert plains or valleys; from grass-lined, men-made lakelets to some huge waterbody, mountain rimmed, of unknown depths and wondrous coloring; from crowded cities with their din and strife to mountain tops, or lonely ocean's shore, where the freed soul in solitude can hold communion with his God—where deep may call to deep, and inspiration gather for life's battles!

All this and more believers find in the pages of the Book of Mormon, and the book that breathes such a spirit must surely have somewhat of divinity in it; and the existence of this divine spirit in the book must be somewhat of evidence that its claims are honest, and its contents true. This, or else we must believe that men gather grapes of thorns, and figs of thistles; that impure fountains send forth pure streams!

I shall be told, however, that the class of witnesses here appealed to, viz., those believers in the Book of Mormon who receive from its pages this spiritual comfort, are for the most part simple folk, who bring little or nothing in the way of scholarship to the examination of the book; and few of them ever stop to consider it in a thoroughly analytical manner at all. I shall not deny the charge; in truth, I rather rejoice in the fact; and I think I am justified in such rejoicing since I must needs think it takes on some of the coloring of that joy which Jesus expressed when He said, on the occasion of some of His simple minded disciples exulting in the possession of certain spiritual graces—"I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that

thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight." (Luke x: 21). The fact that this spiritual grace and comfort from the volume of American scripture is enjoyed chiefly by people of humble spirit, is an evidence to me that a certain truth expressed by ancient apostles is universal in its nature—good in all ages and among all people, viz., "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble." (James iv: 6; Peter v: 5.)

When men speak of pride their hearers have in mind chiefly the "purse-proud"—the pride of the rich made haughty by the power which wealth gives; or else they think of "birth-pride"—the distinction that comes from the accident of birth; or of "political-pride," that comes from civic position; or perhaps the "pride of the brave and strong," gratified by recognition in high martial stations. But there is another pride more offensive to God, perhaps, than pride in any one of the forms mentioned. I mean "intellectual pride," the pride of knowledge, of opinion, which so often attends upon the worldly learned man who has not as yet progressed so far in learning as to bring to the mind that humility of spirit which rightly belongs to, and will at last be found with profound learning. For my own part I can think of nothing that could be a greater offense against the majesty of God than for a man with his limited intellectual power presuming to pass judgment upon and reject the things of God, because, forsooth, those things do not conform to his opinion of what the things of God should be like; or because the way in which they are revealed does not conform to the manner in which he thinks God should impart His truths. Such pride always has and always will separate men from receiving knowledge by divine communication. While the meek and humble of spirit, borne down with the sense of their own limitations, find grace and spirital enlightenment and comfort in the things which God reveals; and often arrive at hidden treasures of knowledge, and even of wisdom, unknown to the "intellectually proud" whom God resisteth.

In this connection, too, it should be remembered the class of people for whom the Book of Mormon was especially prepared. While a revelation to all the world, and containing profound truths the depths of which man by human wisdom has not yet sounded, it is primarily designed for the benighted native American races, fallen from the high station their forefathers once held in God's favor; and its simple plainness and faith-promoting power will yet constitute it a mighty instrumentality in bringing those races to a knowledge of God, and a true understanding of their relationship to him. Hence I say, it is pre-eminently fitting that this book should be of such character as to appeal to the understanding of the simple, and those who are willing and happy to be taught of God. And then, in any event, religion is and ought to be a "simple business," since among even highly civilized nations there are many unlearned people who can understand only that which is simple, and concerns alike the ignorant and the learned, the poor and the rich. But plain to the point of being simple as the Book of Mormon is, when men are once made aware of its power to rest the mind, to cheer the heart, to uplift the soul, they go to its pages for help as the lame and blind and sick were wont to go to old Bethesda's pool, to whose waters an angel's touch had imparted healing virtues.

The spirit of the Book of Mormon, then, its beneficent influence upon man's minds, are among the strongest evidences of its truth. This will appear all the more if the reader will but call to mind the fact that this influence does not arise from the cleverness of its construction; for its structure, as men view books, is complex, confusing, and clumsy. Its spirit and influence do not arise from its strict logical treatment of historical events, much less from its philosophical treatment of them; compared in these particulars with the works of Hume, Maculay, Gibbon, Hallam, or George Bancroft, it would be esteemed contemptible. Nor do the beneficent effects of the book upon the minds of men arise from its rhetoric, its beauty of diction, or the pleasing correctness of its language; in all these particulars it is admitted to be faulty; it has few or none of these merely human excellences for which it may be desired. Whatever power it possesses to cheer, comfort, and encourage men; by virtue of its human excellencies, but in spite of their absence; therefore whatever power to build up hope, create faith, or promote charity, exists not such influence for good as it possesses must be attributed to the spirit of God; and for that reason the book itself must be accorded a divine origin.

A VISIT TO THE STOCKPORT SUNDAY SCHOOL.

BY PRESIDENT JOHN W. GIBSON, OF THE MANCHESTER CONFERENCE.

THINKING that a description of this world-renowned school, whose students are to be found in every part of the civilized globe, would be of interest, herewith forward you a short account of a visit Elder S. A. Smoot and myself paid to this magnificent institution, on May 7th, 1905.

This Sunday school is said to be the largest single institution of the kind in the world, and dates back to 1787, being the outgrowth of the "Town Schools," six in number, which were governed by a committee representing various sections of the Protestant Christian Church, and had for its object the education of the working classes, who on week-days, in those times, were compelled to labor twelve and fourteen hours per day, children of tender age included.

The first teachers were paid 1s 6d per day out of a common fund. The present system of gratuitous teaching was inaugurated by Mr. Joseph Mayer, who became connected with the school in 1790.

Like all innovations on old habits, it had its battles to fight and difficulties to surmount before it overcame its opposers who claimed that it was a desecration of the Sabbath to teach on Sunday, notwithstanding the Great Master's example of doing good to the afflicted on that day. Means were also required to furnish halls, pay rent, purchase books, etc., but with indefatigable zeal, Mr. Mayer and his associates toiled on. As the school continued to grow, they moved from place to place, until 1805, when they laid the foundation stone of the present magnificent and commodious building, which with the addition made in 1835 forms three sides of a quadrangle, four stories high. It contains a large hall, or chapel, capable of seating from three to four thousand people, several smaller halls with a seating capacity of three to four hundred each, between forty and fifty recitation rooms, committee rooms, offices for