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Roberts Affirms Book of Mormon Antiquity

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ROBERTS AFFIRMS BOOK OF MORMON ANTIQUITY

*"These words are not of men nor of man,
but of me; wherefore, you shall testify they
are of me and not of man." (D&C 18:34)*

Long unseen by LDS scholars and students, a typescript entitled *The Truth, The Way, The Life* by B. H. Roberts was recently published by BYU Studies.¹ Roberts worked on this treatise about the plan of salvation mainly in 1927 and 1928, but he was still revising it in 1930, making these pages some of his last words written for publication; he died in 1933.

Because this manuscript has long been known only for its few controversial pages on the creation, it comes as an unexpected bonus to learn that it repeatedly and unequivocally asserts the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. While such affirmative statements may seem perfectly unremarkable to casual readers, it is precisely their routine orthodoxy that makes them so notable. Coming from one of the great intellects of the Church, whose views about the Book of Mormon supposedly became more intellectually sophisticated in his last years, these unequivocal statements will come as a disappointment to anyone who has imagined Roberts as a closet doubter or late-in-life skeptic.

These statements should especially answer the questions that some people have asked about how Roberts really felt about the Book of Mormon after he wrote his Book of

Mormon Study in 1922. That work identified several Book of Mormon problems and called urgently for further study. Some have seen that work as evidence that Roberts changed his views in the face of problematic evidence, but in light of the newly released manuscript, we now can determine that Roberts did not waver in his belief.

First, in the newly released treatise, Roberts describes the miraculous coming forth of the Book of Mormon in strong, straightforward, traditional terms: "Three years after this first revelation an angel of God named Moroni was sent to the Prophet to reveal the existence of an ancient volume of scripture known as the Book of Mormon, a book which gives an account of the hand-dealings of God with the people whom he brought to the continents of America from what we now call the 'Old World.'"²

He describes the Jaredites and Nephites as ancient peoples and affirms that "Joseph Smith was commanded to translate, and was given the power and means by which he could translate the unknown language of these ancient American peoples."³

Second, the manuscript contains several statements that necessarily assume the antiquity and literal truthfulness of this ancient American scripture. For example, in marshalling evidence for the premortal existence of Jesus, Roberts assures his readers that "the preexistent Spirit of the Christ appeared to an ancient prophet among the Jaredite people."⁴ Roberts likewise speaks literally of the words that the resurrected Jesus "said to the assembled Nephites to whom he appeared on the Western Continent."⁵ Indeed, Roberts believed that "no incident in the gospel history is more emphatically proven than this great truth, the resurrection of the Son of God,"⁶ and he used as his key witness "the appearance of the risen Redeemer to a multitude of people in America."⁷

Third, Roberts often identifies Book of Mormon prophets by the ancient centuries in which they lived. Lehi, he says, lived "before the birth of Christ, early in the fifth [sic] century, B.C."⁸ He identifies a prophecy in the book of Alma as "one written near the close of the second century B.C."⁹

Fourth, several times Roberts goes out of his way to describe Book of Mormon authors as "ancient." He calls Lehi "an ancient American prophet."¹⁰ He buttresses another argument by citing "revelations of God to the ancient inhabitants of America."¹¹ He calls the book "the American volume of scripture" containing the words "of the old prophets of the ancient American race."¹²

Fifth, he treats many Book of Mormon scriptures as the unique, authoritative source of revealed knowledge on numerous important topics, especially on the nature of earth life, opposition in all things, and the atonement of Jesus Christ. He takes joy in drawing attention to doctrines "derived almost wholly from the teachings of the Book of Mormon."¹³ To Roberts, the four standard works were "all of equal authority, all of them dependable sources of knowledge."¹⁴

Beyond seeing the Book of Mormon as ancient and authoritative, Roberts extols it as a masterful work, filled with master strokes of genius. He considers Lehi's blessing to Jacob to be a philosophical masterpiece. He becomes eloquent in describing "the words of the Christ himself to one of the ancient American prophets."¹⁵ Rejoicing in a Book of Mormon reading, he exclaims, "How beautifully clear this principle of purity in thought is set forth."¹⁶

In a handwritten note on his third draft of this volume, Roberts penned the following note: "Add 'other sheep I have'—Christ mission to western continents. St. John 10 ch."¹⁷ This note was added as Roberts went through the manuscript for the last time.

Can there be any doubt that the man who wrote such words about the Book of Mormon believed it to be what it claims to be? If he had entertained any such doubts, would he have repeatedly included such words in *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, which he hoped would be his magnum opus? It is certain that he stood by the words in this treatise, for he staunchly refused to alter its final draft. Unfortunately, these words were not around when a cloud was raised about Roberts's testimony of the Book of Mormon. Now, one would hope that this latest development will dispel any seriously lingering residue of that shadow.

Research by John W. Welch, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (November 1993): 2.

NOTES

1. See B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996).
2. *Ibid.*, 469.
3. *Ibid.*, 470.
4. *Ibid.*, 263.
5. *Ibid.*, 482–83.
6. *Ibid.*, 395.
7. *Ibid.*, 394.
8. *Ibid.*, 401.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 75.
11. *Ibid.*, 275.
12. *Ibid.*, 259.
13. *Ibid.*, 444.
14. *Ibid.*, 276.
15. *Ibid.*, 445.
16. *Ibid.*, 501.
17. *Ibid.*, 179.