

defending the Book of Mormon and became its staunchest apologist, had to admit the evidence proved Joseph Smith was a plagiarist.

One must empathize with the elderly Roberts as he came to realize he had spent a lifetime defending something which he now knew was a fraud. It is heartbreaking. It is perhaps, this fraudulent perpetration of the Book of Mormon that is the most heartbreaking aspect of Mormonism. Millions of Mormons base their faith in Mormonism upon this book which is no more than the invention of Joseph Smith. Mormon Apostle Orson Pratt correctly identified the essential question concerning the Book of Mormon when he declared:

“If true, (the Book of Mormon) is one of the most important messages ever sent from God to man. If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked, bold, deep-laid impositions ever palmed upon the world, calculated to deceive and ruin millions who sincerely receive it as the Word of God, and will suppose themselves built upon the rock of truth, until they are plunged, with their families, into hopeless despair.”

What was the final resolution for Brigham H. Roberts? No one can say for sure. However, I am afraid for him. I fear that this giant intellectual, who could stand against the president of the Church and call the Apostles to task, committed intellectual suicide. In a conversation with Wesley Lloyd, just two months before his death, Roberts showed him what he called “a revolutionary article on the origin of the Book of Mormon.” In Lloyd’s opinion, Roberts’ work was, “far too strong for the average Church member.”

What Lloyd saw was “A Book of Mormon Study,” a 300-page document in which Roberts sets forth his reasons for concluding that the Book of Mormon was not of divine origin. In the document, Roberts investigated the documents (including *View of the Hebrews*) which Joseph Smith could have consulted in writing the Book of Mormon. He investigated “the imaginative mind of Joseph Smith.” He quotes Joseph’s mother who recalled how Joseph would give “amusing recitals” in which he would describe, “the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and

also their religious worship.” All this, Roberts acknowledged, “took place *before* the young prophet had received the plates of the Book of Mormon.”

Roberts suggests that Smith became caught up in spiritual “excesses” out of which he imagined prophecies and manifestations:

“His revelations become merely human productions. . . Morbid imagination, morbid expression of emotions (were) likely to find their way into the knowledge of Joseph Smith and influence his conceptions of spiritual things.”

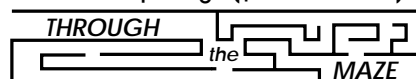
The Gold Plates Didn't Exist

Roberts, according to Lloyd, concluded that Smith’s visions were “psychological” and that the gold plates, “were not objective”—that is, they didn’t *really* exist! They existed only on a “spiritual”, or subjective plane.

Conclusion

God was gracious to B. H. Roberts. God let him see the overwhelming evidence of Joseph Smith’s fraud. We cannot be sure what his final conclusions were because he died before he could resolve these issues. However, the evidence indicates that B. H. Roberts was so steeped in the deception of Mormonism that he was unable to escape its spiritual hold. In his last conversation with Lloyd, with only two months of life before him, Roberts indicated that he had not yet given up on Joseph Smith. He said that although the Book of Mormon was of obvious human origin, perhaps the Church was still true. Perhaps he could yet establish the divinity of Joseph’s call. If the Book of Mormon failed him, perhaps he could find divinity in the Mormon Church’s secondary book of scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants!

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The Disappointment of B. H. Roberts



Five Questions That Forced a Mormon General Authority to Abandon the Book of Mormon

Brigham H. Roberts is revered in Mormon history as one of the Mormon Church’s greatest theologians and historians. His six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church* is still one of the most respected works of Mormon history. Roberts was a General Authority, member of the Mormon Church’s First Council of the Seventy, a group which is second only to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. In 1898 he was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives, although he was never seated because he was a polygamist.

As a young missionary in Tennessee, Roberts began to formulate his defense of the Book of Mormon. Upon one occasion he debated a

Campbellite minister on the authority of the Book of Mormon. That debate was the beginning of his reputation within the Mormon Church as a leading defender of the Book of Mormon. In time he became recognized as *the* expert Book of Mormon apologist. In 1909 he published his chief defense of the Book of Mormon, entitled, *New Witnesses for God*.

The Doubts Begin

In 1921 an event occurred which forever changed Roberts' life. A young Mormon from Salina, Utah, William Riter, wrote to Apostle James E. Talmage with five questions challenging the Book of Mormon. Riter had been asked the questions by a man from Washington, D.C. who was investigating the claims of Mormonism. Talmage was too busy to answer the questions, so he sent the letter on to Roberts. This was the beginning of an investigation which would trouble Roberts until his death in 1933. The study deeply challenged his faith in the Book of Mormon and ultimately changed his opinion of its divine origin.

Roberts' personal struggle with his waning confidence in the Book of Mormon is recorded in three documents he produced in the last years of his life. None of these works was published during his lifetime, but they are now available. A comprehensive study of these documents was published in 1985 as *Studies of the Book of Mormon* by the University of Illinois. This book is edited by two Mormon scholars: Brigham D. Madsen edited the manuscript and Sterling M. McMurrin wrote an introductory essay.

Roberts studied the questions for four months without replying to William Riter. Riter finally wrote to him, asking if he had completed his response. On Dec. 28, 1921, Roberts wrote back saying he was studying the problems, had not yet reached a conclusion and would soon respond. *The next day Roberts wrote an open letter to President Heber J. Grant, to Grant's counselors, to the Twelve Apostles and to the First Council of Seventy, requesting an emergency meeting with all of them to discuss the matter.*

Roberts told the General Authorities:

"I found the difficulties (raised by the five questions) more serious than I thought...it is a matter that will concern the faith of the Youth of the Church now (and) also in the future."

President Grant responded immediately to Roberts' request for an emergency meeting of the Church's top

leadership. Within a week the brethren assembled for an intense two-day conference at which Roberts delivered a 141 page report entitled, "Book of Mormon Difficulties, a Study." Roberts appealed to the collective wisdom of the brethren and said he was seeking the inspiration of the Lord in order to answer the questions.

Disappointed

It is fair to say the General Authorities "stalled" Roberts at the meeting. After two days, he came away disappointed and discouraged. In a letter to President Grant four days after the meeting he said:

"I was greatly disappointed over the net results of the discussion...There was so much said that was utterly irrelevant, and so little said...that was helpful."

Roberts continued to discuss the matter through letters with President Grant and continued for some months to meet with a committee formed out of the larger group comprised of one of Grant's counselors, Talmage, and Apostle John Widsoe. But, Roberts never was satisfied with the response of the brethren.

As his investigation continued, he became more and more disillusioned with the Book of Mormon; and he always resented the response he received at the two-day seminar. Two months before his death he told a friend, Wesley P. Lloyd, former dean of the graduate school of BYU, that the defense the brethren made for the Book of Mormon might "satisfy people who didn't think, but (it was) a very inadequate answer for a thinking man." *He said Apostle Richard R. Lyman did not take the matter seriously and the others, "merely one by one stood up and bore testimony to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. George Albert Smith—in tears—testified that his faith in the Book of Mormon had not been shaken by the questions."*

Roberts told Lloyd "in a Church which claims continuous revelation, a crisis had arisen where revelation was necessary."

Concerning the Five Questions

Of the five questions, Roberts was most concerned about the linguistic problem. (See accompanying sidebar "The Five Questions.") However, he also discovered *new* problems. He told Lloyd he saw literary problems in the Book of Mormon as well as geographic problems. Of the geographic problems he asked:

Where were the Mayan cliffs and high mountain peaks in the Book of Mormon? The

geography of the Book of Mormon looked suspiciously like the New England of Joseph Smith!

Joseph Smith Did Not Get The Book of Mormon From God!

Roberts eventually concluded that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon himself—that he did *not* translate it from gold plates. Smith produced it, Roberts said, by drawing upon his own natural talent and mate-

THE FIVE QUESTIONS ROBERTS COULDN'T ANSWER

B. H. Roberts asked the General Authorities to answer these five questions:

1. Linguistics: Riter asked—if the American Indians were all descendants of Lehi—why there was such diversity in the language of the American Indians and why there was no indication of Hebrew in any of the Indian languages?

2. The Book of Mormon says that Lehi found horses when he arrived in America. The horse described in the Book of Mormon (as well as many other domestic animals) did not exist in the New World before the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors.

3. Nephi is stated to have had a "bow of steel." Jews did not know steel at that time. And there was no iron smelted on this continent until after the Spaniard conquest.

4. The Book of Mormon frequently mentions "swords and scimeters (scimitars)." Scimitars are unknown until the rise of the Moslem faith (after 600 A.D.).

5. The Book of Mormon says the Nephites possessed silk. Silk did not exist in America in pre-Columbian times.

rials like Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* (published near Joseph's home a few years *before* the translation of the Book of Mormon).

Roberts' Reaction

Roberts became convinced that *View of the Hebrews* was "the ground plan" for the Book of Mormon. Roberts, the man who had started his missionary career