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B. H. Roberts and Book of Mormon Scholarship

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Brigham Henry Roberts, a Book of Mormon scholar in the early twentieth century, was a pioneer in his field. He conducted research regarding the culture and the geography of the Book of Mormon peoples in an attempt to determine the setting of the Book of Mormon. His extensive work in this area has significantly influenced the progress of Book of Mormon research. Roberts also enthusiastically defended the book when others criticized it. He was able to do so effectively because of his study of and familiarity with the Book of Mormon. Roberts did, however, have a few limitations, the most detrimental being his unfounded assumption that “the narrow neck of land” in the Book of Mormon is the Isthmus of Panama. Yet, Roberts’s pioneering efforts remain today a crucial catalyst to modern analytical studies of the Book of Mormon.
B. H. ROBERTS
AND BOOK OF MORMON SCHOLARSHIP
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY: AGE OF TRANSITION

DAVIS BITTON
In 1889, just a year after his call to the First Council of Seventy, Roberts began publishing *Corianton* as a serial in the *Contributor.* Not a work of “scholarship,” it shows his fondness for the Nephite record, as did his later three-part article, “A Nephite’s [Alma’s] Commandments to His Three Sons.” While on his Tennessee mission, Roberts defended the Book of Mormon in debate. Against Parson Alsup, he confronted the specific charges that the Book of Mormon “had not a single redeeming verse”; that it contradicted the Bible; and that it presented knowledge of Christ anachronistically. In the late 1880s, as a writer for the *Millennial Star* in England, he wrote several editorials on the Book of Mormon, one of which was published as a small four-page pamphlet entitled *Analysis of the Book of Mormon,* later enlarged to 12 or 16 pages. In 1895, volume one of *New Witnesses for God* appeared, dealing mainly with Joseph Smith. In 1907–1909, Roberts engaged critic Theodore Schroeder in a debate on the origin of the Book of Mormon. In 1909, he brought out volume two of *New Witnesses,* containing in chapters 9 through 14 a further analysis of the Book of Mormon. Finally, in 1911, volume 3 of *New Witnesses,* added, in chapters 37 through 43, a detailed analysis of the Book of Mormon under the heading “internal evidences.” The same year the church published new editions of the first two volumes. Although he continued to think, speak, and write for another 30 years, our assessment of Roberts as a Book of Mormon scholar rests mainly on these volumes. As anyone who approaches the Book of Mormon should, Roberts started by mastering what the text said. His analysis—still valuable although subject to qualifications at certain points—is contained in two chapters, analyzing the successive migrations and the histories of the Jaredites and then Lehi’s colony. He traces the migrations in the New World and describes government and religion among the Nephites.

Some critics denied that the Book of Mormon was a valid national history. In response, Roberts puts forth a charming comparison:

> It has been frequently urged by writers against the Book of Mormon that it pretends to be the national or racial literature of the peoples of the western hemisphere, and that in the light of such pretensions it is utterly contemptible. Such a conception of the Book of Mormon, however, is entirely unwarranted, since no such claims are made for it by those at all acquainted with its character. . . .

The Book of Mormon was constructed in this manner: Let us suppose that a writer has before him the national literature of the old Roman empire; the works of Livy, Sallust, Virgil, Caesar, Terrance, Cicero, and the rest. The account of the chief events mentioned in these several volumes he condenses in his own style into a single volume. Coming to the annals of Tacitus, however, he is so well pleased with some portions of them that notwithstanding the events Tacitus narrates parallel some parts of his own abridgment of the history, he places them, without editing or changing them in the least, with his own writings. This work, upon his death, falls into the hands of his son, who is also a writer. In the course of the second writer’s researches he accidentally, or providentially, as you will, discovers the works of the Greek historian, Xenophon. He considers this writer’s history of Greece of such importance—especially his history of the “Retreat of the Ten Thousand”—that he condenses into a few pages the events related by Xenophon and binds them in with his father’s work, with such comments of his own as he considers necessary. As the first writer’s abridgment of Xenophon’s writings would not be the national literature of Greece; and as this supposed case exactly illustrates the manner in which the Book of Mormon was constructed by...
Mormon and Moroni, the absurdity of regarding the book so produced as the national or racial literature of the peoples who have inhabited the western world, will be apparent.7

A teacher, Roberts had thought about how to communicate the complicated structure of the Book of Mormon to others. He was close to the recognition that it is a lineage account, really a religious record within a highly selective historical framework.

It was Roberts more than anyone else who established in Mormondom the distinction between external and internal evidences that had already been applied to the study of the Bible. By "external evidence" Roberts meant not only archaeological discoveries but anything outside the book that had a bearing on its authenticity. For Roberts the most powerful external evidence was the testimony of the witnesses who signed the two affidavits published in the volume.8 In seven chapters he goes over their testimony, refutes countertheories such as supposed collusion, and confidently pronounces the witnesses' testimony unrefuted and unrefutable.9 When Preston Nibley wrote a book on the witnesses and Richard Anderson later produced his now definitive studies, they were building on the foundation laid early in the century by B. H. Roberts.10

In turning his attention to archaeology, Roberts appropriately begins by asking what the Book of Mormon requires as to location and climate for both the Jaredite and Nephite civilizations—still an eminently responsible way of approaching the subject.11 Roberts was cautious in stating what he thought archaeology could do. Most of the construction of buildings by the Book of Mormon peoples, he suggested, was with perishable material, mainly wood, little of which survived.12 And who can quarrel with the following?

Of course it may be possible that in the present state of knowledge of American antiquities evidences for all these facts may not now be obtainable; but if evidences tending to prove them can be pointed out at all, it will be so much in favor of the Book of Mormon. Meantime the reader should be cautioned not to expect too much from the character of the evidence now to be considered, nor should he be discouraged if in quantity and clearness it falls below his expectations. It must be remembered that examination of our American antiquities, especially in Central and South America, has not yet been as thoroughly made as it will be; there are many buried cities and other monuments yet to be heard from, as also, a better understanding of those monuments of ancient American civilization already known would lead to the conclusion that the evidences are not as abundant as they are needed to be.
brought to light. Moreover, it should be remembered that for many ages the Bible stood practically without the advantages of monumental testimony in its support.\textsuperscript{13}

In surveying Native American traditions—including references to the creation, a great flood, a great tower, and migrations—Roberts acknowledges that he is a “compiler” rather than an original researcher.\textsuperscript{14} Uncomfortable with the extravagant claims of some writers, he seeks a middle position:

In considering authorities upon American antiquities, one thing should be especially observed: one should be upon his guard against the credulity and bias of the early writers; and equally upon his guard against the skepticism and bias of the more modern ones. The former, living in an age of superstition and credulity, and having special interests to serve, would have us believe too much; the latter, living in an age super-critical and doubting, would have us believe too little. There is no doubt but what the Spanish writers connected with the conquest of America colored their narratives to give importance in the eyes of their countrymen in Europe to the events with which they were associated; and they likely exaggerated whatever had such a tendency. . . . So with the missionaries who accompanied the first European expeditions and those who immediately followed them. They sometimes very likely saw analogies between the Christian faith and some of the traditions and superstitions of the natives where none existed.\textsuperscript{15}

Later scholars who have studied the different Native American cultures in depth would, I assume, find this section of his book unacceptable and would ridicule Roberts for too easily accepting the claims for a Hebrew connection put forth by nineteenth-century writers like Lord Kingsborough and James Adair.\textsuperscript{16} I think he would reply that he was passing them on for whatever they are worth, subject to any corrections required by later research. He was undoubtedly gullible in putting forth as evidence such relics as the Pittsfield Hebrew Parchment, the Newark Hebrew Tablet, the Cincinnati gold plate, the Kinderhook plates, and the Tuccabatchey plates, but again, I believe, he would say he was \textit{reporting}, leaving to future study the final determination of authenticity.\textsuperscript{17}

At the conclusion of his discussion of American antiquities, he summarizes his findings:

The evidence establishes the fact of the existence of ancient civilizations in America; that the said civilizations are successive; that their monuments overlay each other, and are confused by a subsequent period of barbarism; that the monuments of the chief centers of American civilizations are found where the Book of Mormon requires them to be located; that the traditions of the native Americans concerning ancient Bible facts, such as relate to the creation, the flood, the Tower of Babel, and the dispersion of mankind, etc., sustain the likelihood of the forefathers of our American aborigines, in very ancient times, being cognizant of such facts either by person[al] contact with them, or by having a knowledge of them through the Hebrew scriptures, or perhaps through both means. All this is in harmony with what the Book of Mormon makes known. . . . The evidences presented also disclose the fact that the native American traditions preserve the leading historical events of the Book of Mormon. That is, the facts of the Jaredite and Nephite migrations; of the intercontinental movements of Book of Mormon peoples; of the advent and character of Messiah, and his ministrations among the people; of the signs of his birth and of his death; of the fact of the Hebrew origin and unity of race. All these facts so strong in the support of the claims of the Book of Mormon… I feel sure cannot be moved.\textsuperscript{18}

Just as we clear our throat to take issue with some of these claims—especially his summary of “native American religious traditions”—we read the following disarming admission:

It should be remembered, in this connection, that it is not insisted upon in these pages that the evidences which American antiquities afford are absolute proofs of the claims of the Book of Mormon. I go no further than to say there is a tendency of external proof in them; and when this tendency of proof is united with the positive, direct external testimony which God has provided in . . . the Three Witnesses and the Eight, this tendency of proof becomes very
strong, and is worthy of most serious attention on the part of those who would investigate the claims of this American volume of scripture.19

Roberts saw converging evidence, powerful in its cumulative force, but he stopped short of claiming “absolute” proof. He could, if necessary, modify some of his assertions while still insisting that the “tendency of proof” was supportive of the Book of Mormon.

Just as his external evidence included much more than archaeological sites, Roberts’s “internal evidence” was multifaceted, including the question of originality, whether the forms of government described are consistent with the alleged time and place, and style and language. Recognizing that we have moved beyond him, I nevertheless often find Roberts an intelligent guide. On Book of Mormon names he noticed differences between the Jaredite and Nephite-Lamanite patterns.20 On the question of whether the writers of the different books in the Book of Mormon betray a different writing style, he showed a sensitive awareness of what one could fairly expect of a work, most of which purported to be written or abridged by only four persons—Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, and Moroni—and then translated into another language. But of course Roberts lived long before computers and word-print studies. He explains errors of grammar, modernisms, and localisms in the Book of Mormon with a rather subtle discussion of the nature of translation and revelation.21 The shallow charge that Lehi quoted Shakespeare was easily disposed of by citing the same idea in Job.22 The serious question as to how the Book of Mormon could quote extensive passages from the King James translation of the Bible was answered in terms of common sense:

It should be understood … that while Joseph Smith obtained the facts and ideas from the Nephite characters through the inspiration of God, he was left to express those facts and ideas, in the main, in such language as he could command; and when he found that parts of the Nephite record closely parallel passages in the Bible, and being conscious that the language of our English Bible was superior to his own, he adopted it, except for those differences indicated in the Nephite original which here and there made the Book of Mormon version of passages superior in sense and clearness. Of course, I recognize the fact that this is but a conjecture; but I believe it to be a reasonable one; and indeed the only one which satisfactorily disposes of the difficulty you point out.23

Noting that there are differences as well as similarities between the texts found in both the Bible and Book of Mormon, Roberts writes: “But how are these differences to be accounted for? They unquestionably arise from the fact that the Prophet compared the King James’ translation with the parallel passages in the Nephite records, and when he found the sense of the passage of the Nephite plates superior to that in the English version he made such changes as would give the superior sense and clearness.”24

When Sidney Sperry and others answered some of these same questions during the next several decades, they did not hesitate to use and expand upon answers Roberts had provided.25 The later analysis of literary forms, the discovery of chiasmus, recognition of the parallelisms that dominate the Book of Mormon from beginning to end, and the large question of biblical phrases throughout the Book of Mormon text, all part of the internal criticism—these were beyond Roberts.26

Far from ignoring opponents, Roberts engaged them. One by one he took on those who had criticized the Book of Mormon or put forth countertheories of its origin. His great strength was the fact that he was defending a territory he knew like the back of his hand. No one in his day had studied the Book of Mormon more thoroughly. He was not the first defender, of course, but he looms large at the beginning of this century and was clearly a forerunner of scholarly defenders down to the present.

B. H. Roberts was a frustrated would-be lawyer, a self-taught scholar, an avid reader, and a skilled, articulate orator. Put all of these together and you have someone ready and willing to leap to the defense of his religion, which was indeed under attack on a variety of fronts. As
his two-volume *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* (1907, 1912) makes abundantly clear, his “apologetic”—read defensive—role was not limited to the Book of Mormon. Yet the Book of Mormon was implicated in the other controversies or challenges.

In 1910, the Reverend Paul Jones in Logan, Utah, leveled an attack on the Book of Mormon from the perspective of higher criticism, first in talks and then in a published pamphlet. Anyone who accepted the latest biblical scholarship simply could not, according to Jones, accept the Book of Mormon. Some of the problems put forth by Jones were the authorship of the Pentateuch, chronological problems regarding the date of the birth and death of Jesus Christ, the dual authorship of the book of Isaiah, and the claim that “Malachi” was not a personal name but a descriptive title. Jones pounced on Roberts’s earlier statement that the Book of Mormon must submit to every test. In an address delivered at Logan, later published in the *Improvement Era*, Roberts reiterated that the Book of Mormon should indeed be subjected to every test, including literary criticism, historical criticism, higher criticism, and archaeology.

On each of Jones’s specific allegations Roberts shows intelligent command of the issue and familiarity with several important works by biblical scholars. But of course, while accepting the legitimacy of the methods, he does not accept the critic’s conclusions. Widespread disagreement about the exact dates of birth and death of Christ, even among the experts, does not, Roberts argues, give confidence in that discipline. They scarcely require a retreat by the Mormon believers. As for the Isaiah problem, which he had already treated in *New Witnesses for God*, Roberts first summarizes Samuel R. Driver’s analysis in *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* and even pronounces it compelling—within a certain frame of reference. At the heart of the issue, claims Roberts, is the unwillingness of modern scholars to accept the possibility of miracles, including foreknowledge of the future by prophets. As one witness of the prophetic foretelling in Isaiah, Roberts cites Josephus, whose *Antiquities of the Jews* told of the acknowledgment by Cyrus, king of Persia, of the prophets who had foretold his name. An even higher authority, says Roberts, quoted from the supposed “Second Isaiah” as a valid prediction of the future—Jesus himself at his first sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth (see Luke 4:16–21). Finally, the Book of Mormon itself is presented as a decisive answer to the question of Isaiah: for those who accept its authenticity, the composition of the entire Isaian text took place before 600 B.C., and it was given authoritative endorsement by the risen Lord.

Addressing the underlying question of whether it were possible, under divine inspiration, to predict the future, Roberts even recounts a miraculous dream of his own that was fulfilled in a remarkable way. The flat, brittle world of secular scholarship and the world of Roberts and his fellow believers did not coincide.

Roberts did not rule out fair-minded investigation. While many of its conclusions were wrong, he said, the essential method of higher criticism was legitimate. “In a conversation with one of our young men who recently returned from an eastern college, where he had come in contact with higher criticism, he remarked to me, ‘Yes, higher criticism shoots to pieces the Book of Mormon.’ ‘Pardon me, my brother,’ I answered, ‘You have misstated the matter; you mean that the Book of Mormon shoots holes in higher criticism.’” We notice that the Nephite scripture doesn’t “shoot to pieces” or demolish higher criticism; rather it “shoots holes” in it by rejecting some of its conclusions.

The last people to defend “the Isaian authorship” of the second part of the book, Jones had asserted, would probably be “advocates of the Book of Mormon.” Roberts replied: That is probably a true prediction. We may, indeed, be the last, but we shall continue the contest. The Book of Mormon will stand for the integrity of the Book of Isaiah; and not only for that, but for all the great historical facts concerning Messiah, and concerning the gospel of salvation through faith in and acceptance of the atonement of the Christ and obedience to His laws, since those facts were revealed to the
ancient prophets upon these American continents. . . . Multitudes [of Nephites] worshiped at his [the Savior’s] feet; saw and felt the wounds in his hands and in his side; and knew that the prophecies of the old prophets among their fathers were now fulfilled in this manifestation and personal presence of the Christ with them. He felt with them the fulness of the gospel of salvation through the atonement of Christ. And that testimony of the gospel, its historicity and reality, contained in the Book of Mormon, shall stand against the results of higher criticism. In that book we have a New Witness for God and Christ, a Witness whose voice cannot be silenced. . . . The truth of God it will establish, and O, how the world needs it! Speaking of his future glorious coming, the Christ said: “When the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith in the earth?” If the results of higher criticism shall be accepted by the Christian peoples of the world, he will not find real, valid faith in the world; neither will he find faith in the gospel of Christ, for which he stands; nor in the scriptures, as the word of God. If our testimony prevails, the answer is to be given in the affirmative: Yea, Lord, thou shalt find faith in the earth.

We hear the strong voice of a believer. When Sidney B. Sperry explained the Isaiah problem and defended the unity of that prophetic book and when, even later, Avraham Gileadi found structural reasons for seeing it as a unified whole, they were building on the foundation laid early in the century by B. H. Roberts.

Roberts lived for another twenty years. His time was largely filled with service as a chaplain in World War I, service as a mission president in the Eastern States, and the usual demanding duties of a General Authority. Even so, he managed to complete two other major works: the six-volume Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, published for the centennial in 1930, and the ambitious The Truth, The Way, The Life, unpublished during his lifetime but finally brought out in 1994. Attempting to address five questions about the Book of Mormon propounded by an Eastern letter-writer, he wrote three different pieces of a manuscript not intended for publication. Without becoming entangled in the question of what this private document signified, we can state that none of the specific questions, all based on false assumptions, has proved fatal to the Book of Mormon, and each of them is in a different position in the 1990s than it was in the 1920s. Roberts continued to use the Book of Mormon in his preaching, his missionary work, and the two great works he completed during these years.

B. H. Roberts represented an earlier age. He lived when it was still possible for some to ridicule the Book of Mormon for describing cities in the ancient New World, when anyone familiar with Native American tribal societies of the plains might pronounce this claim ridiculous. The mention of cement and horses and elephants provoked ridicule very early in Book of Mormon criticism but continued to be repeated. Hence, like the Pratt Brothers, George Reynolds, and others before him, Roberts cited “evidence.” Some readers still required the basic education that would inform them about the high societies in Central and South America. He quoted authorities to prove that the horse existed in the ancient New World, although he was quite cognizant of a disconnect between the chronology of the fossil remains and the much more recent Jaredite-Lehite civilizations. He was trying to keep the question open, but on such questions he is of course by no means the final word.

His external evidence failed to include descriptions of the Near East around 600 B.C. Relating to the first 40 pages of the Book of Mormon, that question, later explored in depth by Hugh Nibley in Lehi in the Desert, apparently did not occur to Roberts. Interested in the surviving native chronicles and histories, Roberts was very far from being able to draw parallels between the Book of Mormon and ancient American codices. Roberts was interested in reports of archaeological discoveries in both the Old World and the New, but we must remind ourselves how undeveloped archaeology was at the turn of the century and even to the end of Roberts’s life in 1933. With the organization of professional societies and the rise of the discipline, the scenery changed significantly. Although undoubtedly he read newspapers and magazines, readers should not go to him for an adequate assessment of the relationship between the Book of Mormon and known material remains.

By far the most serious limitation and impinging on much else was Roberts’s apparent assumption that “the narrow neck of land” of Book of Mormon geography was the isthmus of Panama, with the Land Southward being South America and the Land Northward, North America. The entire western hemisphere thus became the field of action, and all its native inhabitants at the time of Columbus were considered descendants of the Nephites and Lamanites. This “large” geography for the Book of Mormon events no longer holds up, not because of new discoveries or revelations but because a meticulous read-
ing of all geographic references in the text requires a much more limited geography. Likewise, it will not do to insist that all indigenous peoples were Book of Mormon descendants. That someone of Roberts's stature could misunderstand matters so basic is unthinkable to some Latter-day Saints—which of course is an argument from authority based on an assumption of infallibility.

Not surprisingly, he was influenced by Orson Pratt, whose identifications were incorporated as footnotes in the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon, and George Reynolds, whose important studies The Story of the Book of Mormon and A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon were published in 1888 and 1891 respectively. But, I wish to insist, even Roberts's discussion of geography cannot be fairly swept aside as simply another example of the “large geography” assumed by most readers until the second half of the present century, for he quite clearly concedes that most of the events took place in Mesoamerica:

Allowance for hyperbole must be made in the expression, “They began to cover the face of the whole earth,” since the facts set forth in the whole history of the Nephites in the Book of Mormon are against the reasonableness of such an expression if taken literally. From the landing of Lehi's colony early in the sixth century B.C., to the date corresponding to the year 55 B.C., when the first considerable migration into the north land took place, Nephite occupancy of the promised land was limited to portions in the south part of the North Continent. The extent of the country occupied was but a very small part of the continent.

In other words, Roberts was quite comfortable with a limited geography that would place the events in Mesoamerica:

By reference to the map the reader, if he will consider the parts of the country now known as the south part of Mexico and Central America, will there find all the conditions that answer to the terms of the description in the passage quoted complied with as to “the sea south, and the sea north; the sea east and the sea west;” (Helaman 3:8) while the physical character of the same land, even now, will answer the requirements of the description of its being a land of “large bodies of water and many rivers;” (Helaman 3:4) and more abundantly may have been so before the convul-

sions of nature which took place in Nephite lands at Messiah's crucifixion.

Just before volume three of New Witnesses was published, Roberts saw reason to doubt the authenticity of a small but powerfully influential statement published in Franklin D. Richards and James A. Little, Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel (1882). Writing during the first decade of the twentieth century, Roberts effectively adopted the limited geographical model:

As these pages go to press the question of the Book of Mormon geography is more than ever recognized as an open one by students of the book. That is to say, it is a question if Mormon views hitherto entertained respecting Book of Mormon lands have not been a misconception by reason of premises forced upon its students by the declaration of an alleged revelation.

The statement, identified as “revelation to Joseph the Seer,” declared that Lehi's party landed in South America at 30S latitude (modern Chile). Examining the original document in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams, Roberts discovered that the phrase “revelation to Joseph the Seer” was added by the publishers. Then this:

If this is not a revelation, the physical description relative to the contour of the lands occupied by the Jaredites and Nephites, that being principally that two large bodies of land were joined by a narrow neck of land—can be found between Mexico and Yucatan with the isthmus of Tehuantepec between. If the investigation now going on shall result in relieving us of the necessity of considering ourselves bound to uphold as a revelation the passage in Richards and Little's Compendium, here considered, many of our difficulties as to the geography of the Book of Mormon—if not all of them in fact, will have passed away. In that event much found in this treatise of the Book of Mormon relative to the Nephites being in South America—written under the impression that the passage in the above named Compendium was, as is there set forth, a revelation—will have to be modified.

It behooves us, therefore, not to quote statements earlier in the text of New Witnesses as his final position on the subject. Roberts had not given geographical
issues the concentrated attention that led to firmer conclusions later in the twentieth century, but his mind was open and he wanted to follow the evidence. He was a transitional figure, influenced by his predecessors but open to other possibilities.

B. H. Roberts was a deeply spiritual, inspired man, a zealous student, but essentially an amateur. He was a creature of his time. He can scarcely be faulted for failing to meet the standards of a generation not his own. If he had lived another sixty years, one can well imagine his enthusiastic participation in the continuing study of the Book of Mormon. To judge from his response to challenges during his lifetime, he would eagerly engage critics who came to the subject with inadequate understanding of the complexity of the Book of Mormon; would point out inconsistencies among the critics; would note generational changes in scholarly conclusions. He would, I believe, continue to argue that the case for the prosecution is far from being so massive as to require capitulation. There is “much virtue in the opening of a tomb,” he wrote when challenging the Egyptologist critics of the Pearl of Great Price facsimiles. The same possibility existed and exists in the New World, where a single discovery can pull the rug from under scholars who had confidently asserted a prior interpretation. “A plea in bar of final conclusions”—his argument of 1913 in favor of suspending judgment—would continue, for the evidence is never all in.

But for Roberts “suspending judgment” meant simply that the scholarly evidence did not allow, much less require, a rejection of the Book of Mormon. As for the personal conviction of B. H. Roberts, that did not depend on the fallible and shifting interpretations of scholars, and that—to judge from the testimony of his ministry and his powerful sermons—was built on a rock.

He was not among those so obsessed with “proofs” that he ignored the spiritual message of the scripture. Responding to supercilious critics who claimed the Book of Mormon had nothing to contribute to religious understandings, Roberts proclaimed the “Originality of the Book of Mormon.” His emphatic conclusion: “Beyond controversy, neither the native intelligence nor the learning of Joseph Smith, can possibly be regarded as equal to such a performance as bringing forth the knowledge which the Book of Mormon imparts upon these profound subjects.” None of those ever proposed as author was equal to the task. Indeed, said Roberts, the Book of Mormon “sounds depths . . . beyond the intelligence and learning of the age itself, in which it came forth.”

Roberts raised a noble standard for all students of the Book of Mormon down to the present: We need not follow our researches in any spirit of fear and trembling. We desire only to ascertain the truth; nothing but the truth will endure; and the ascertaining of the truth and the proclamation of the truth in any given case, or upon any subject, will do no harm to the work of the Lord which is itself truth. Nor need we be surprised if now and then we find our predecessors, many of whom bear honored names and deserve our respect and gratitude for what they achieved in making clear the truth, as they conceived it to be—we need not be surprised if we sometimes find them mistaken in their conceptions and deductions; just as the generations who succeed us in unfolding in a larger way some of the yet unlearned truths of the Gospel, will find that we have had some misconceptions and made some wrong deductions in our day and time. The book of knowledge is never a sealed book. It is never “complete and forever closed;” rather it is an eternally open book, in which one may go on constantly discovering new truths and modifying our knowledge of old ones. The generation which preceded us did not exhaust by their knowledge all the truth, so that nothing was left for us in its unfolding: no, not even in respect of the Book of Mormon; any more than we shall exhaust all discovery in relation to that book and leave nothing for the generation following us to develop. □
4. For example, see Hough, “Balances,” 30.
7. See Josephus, Antiquities, 1.1.
11. A quick summary of the questions: There is not sufficient time for all American Indians to be descendants of the Lamanites, and the many languages required a much longer period of change; the Book of Mormon, “assumed to be the Book of Mormon’s cimiter, did not originate before the rise of Islam; and steel, the horse, and silk, all mentioned in the Book of Mormon are not present in the Old Testament.”

B. H. Roberts and Book of Mormon Scholarship Early Twentieth Century: Age of Transition Davis Bitton
2. This series was published later as a book, Corianton: A Nephite Story (1902). Richard Cracroft says this work was turned into a play and performed on Broadway: See Cracroft, “Seeking the Good, the Pure, the Elevating,” Ensign, June 1981, 57–62; July 1981, 56–61.
3. See Improvement Era 3, June 1900, 570–78; July 1900, 635–57; August 1900, 760–66; September 1900, 855–43.
4. Madsen, Defender of the Faith, 128.
6. The bibliographical record of this work can be confusing both as to title and volume numbers. When it appeared in 1895, the work carried the title, in the singular, A New Witness for God. Treating Joseph Smith, this work in two volumes later became volume one. Between 1903 and 1906, a series of chapters appeared as manuals 7, 8, and 9 of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association. In 1909 these were brought together and published as New Witnesses for God, II. The Book of Mormon, volumes 2 and 3, changing the word witness to that of natural form. Volume 1 was republished in 1911, while volumes 2 and 3 were brought together and published as a single volume in 1920, 1926, and 1927.
8. See New Witnesses, 2:246, 281.
11. See New Witnesses, 2:347.
34. See ibid., 2:347–55.
42. New Witnesses, 2:290.
43. See ibid., 2:290.
44. For the most recent assessment of this key document, see Frederic G. Williams III, “Did Lehi Land in Chile? An Assessment of the Frederick G. Williams Statement” (FARMS, 1988).
46. “It is frequently the case that a proper setting forth of a subject makes its truth self-evident; and all other evidence becomes of secondary importance. Especially is this the case when setting forth the Book of Mormon for the world’s acceptance; in which matter we have the right to expect, and the assurance in the book itself that we shall receive, the co-operation of divine agencies to confirm to the souls of men the truth of the Nephite record, that as that record was written in the first instance by divine commandment, by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation, and as it was preserved by angelic safeguard, and at last brought forth by revelation, and translated by what men regard as miraculous means, so it is provided in God’s providences . . . that its truth shall be attested to individuals by the operations of the Holy Spirit upon the human mind. . . . This must ever be the chief source of evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon. All other evidence is secondary to this, the primary and infallible. No arrangement of evidence, however skilfully ordered; no argument, however adroitly made, can ever take its place; for this witness of the Holy Spirit to the soul of man for the truth of the Book of Mormon is the concern of God’s evidence to the truth. . . . To be known, the truth must be stated and the clearer and more complete the statement is, the better opportunity will the Holy Spirit have for testifying to the souls of men that the work is true. . . . [However], I would not have it thought that the evidence and argument presented in [here] are unimpeachable, much less necessary. Secondary evidences in support of truth, like secondary causes in natural phenomena, may be of finitare importance, and
mighty factors in the achievement of God’s purposes” (Roberts, New Witnesses, 2:vi–viii).


What Is The Significance Of Zelph In The Study Of Book of Mormon Geography? Kenneth W. Goddery


3. Moses Martin, Diary, LDS Church Archives.

4. Wilford Woodruff, Diary, LDS Church Archives. This entry is on a page headed “May 8th, 1834.” See also Scott Kenney, ed., Wilford Woodruff: Utah, Signature, 1983, 110. John L. Sorenson, in a letter to the author, observes that the only period when an Indian might be known only approximately from the Rocky Mountains to the eastern part of the continent is likely limited to the Middle Woodland Period or Hopewell culture dating within the limits a.d. 1–500. It is possible, though less likely, that something of the same situation of widespread, interregional communication could date to the Mississippian Period, a.d. 1500–1600. It is of course possible that Zelph burial, which was near the surface at the mound’s top, dated considerably later than the period of mound construction. For information regarding connections between Mesoamerica and the Hopewell Indians, see James B. Griffin, “Mesoamerica and the Eastern United States in Prehistoric Times,” in Handbook of Middle American Indians (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 4:111–51, David S. Black, and N’omi Greber, Hopewell Archaeology (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979). Unadahga is the name of a tribe of Indians that belonged to the five-nation confederacy of the Iroquois who occupied upper New York State. See John Mohawk, “Origins of Iroquois Political Thought,” Northeast Indian Quarterly 3 (summer 1986): 16–20.

5. Helen C. Kimball, Autobiography, LDS Church Archives. This was probably written after the Saints had arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. There is evidence that the autobiography was taken from Times and Seasons 6, 1 February 1845, 788.

6. George A. Smith, Journal, 2 June 1834, LDS Church Archives. The following note was appended: “a narrative of which is published in the Church History.”

7. Joseph Smith, Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, 3 June 1834, LDS Church Archives, see n.1, addenda, p. 5. A second copy of the same material known as “Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-2,” was apparently written in the hand of Wilmer Benson. It differs from the Richards version in a dozen details of spelling, punctuation, and phrasing, but only two differences are substantive. Where Richards describes Zelph as “a man of God,” Benson puts “a son of God,” and Richards’s “a great struggle with the Lamanites” reads in Benson, “the last great struggle with the Lamanites.”

8. Times and Seasons 6, 1 January 1846, 876.

9. Joseph Smith, He Church (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902), 279–80. Compare 1848 edition, pp. 79–80. Fletcher B. Hammond states that Preston Nibley, Assistant Church Historian, had authorized him to say that “the 1843 edition of the Documentary History of the Church, Vol. II, at pages 79 and 80, correctly reports the ‘Zelph’ incident, and that part of that the 1843 (1848) edition of the same history which differs from it is erroneous. That is to say that the Prophet Joseph did not say ‘Unadahga who was known from the hill Cumorah, or, eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains’, but he did say: ‘Unadahga, was known from the eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains, he did not say Zelph was killed during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephi, but he did say Zelph was killed in a battle between the last great struggle with the Lamanites’.” However, as we have shown previously, it is impossible to know exactly what Joseph said on these matters. Therefore, even Preston Nibley’s educated statement may attribute more to Joseph Smith than the facts warrant. Fletcher B. Hammond, Geography of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1959), 103, see pp. 100–103.


13. See, for example, John L. Sorenson, An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 8–23; John E. Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1 (1988): 28–70. Even though most events of Nephite history may have taken place within a relatively small area, it is evident that cultural transmissions radiated outward from Central America, both to the north and to the south; see “Mesoamericans in Pre-Spanish South America,” in John W. Welch, ed., Reconstructing the Book of Mormon (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 215–17; and “Mesoamericans in Pre-Columbian North America,” in Welch, ed., Exploring, 218–20.


16. This information was shared with me by John L. Sorenson, in a letter dated 1 June 1999.


Out of the Dust

1. “Are the Jaredites an Extinct People?” Improvement Era 6, 1902–1903, 43–44.


Credits: In the previous issue (8/1), the painting of a New Mexico mesa settlement used on pages 4–5 was The Time of Kali by Gottfried Lindauer 1907, oil on canvas. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, gift of Mr. H. E. Partridge, 1915. We appreciate Louis Migliore’s facilitating our use of this illustration. In the same issue, the pictures on pages 44–45 and 47 were taken from a mural by Diego Rivera in the National Palace in Mexico. Used with the permission of Dolores Olmedo.