

No, Sir, That's Not History!

John W. Welch

2 Nephi 33:2 “Wherefore, they cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught.”

The recent publication of B. H. Roberts’s personal papers on similarities between the Book of Mormon and the *View of the Hebrews*¹ has raised again a question that has circulated for several years among certain critics: Did B. H. Roberts lose faith in the Book of Mormon? The editor of the Roberts studies, Brigham Madsen, reports that the record is “mixed,” that “whether or not Roberts retained his belief in the Book of Mormon may never be determined.”² A closer look at the evidence, however, yields a much different assessment.

A critical issue is determining *when* Roberts wrote *Studies*. This is important because the earlier that Roberts wrote it, the less evidence there is that he worked on it for a long time as a serious and troubling project. The editor figures it was an ongoing project for Roberts during his mission presidency in New York (1922-1927). Newly discovered evidence, however, proves that position false. This evidence—obvious only on the original documents themselves—shows definitively that Roberts began the study in January 1922 and finished it (except for a few minor proofreading changes) *before* he left for the Eastern States Mission on May 29, 1922.

Consider these points:

1. The first page of Roberts’s typescript originally read: “A number of years ago—thirteen years ago, to be exact—in . . . *New Witnesses for God*, I discussed . . .” Since *New Witnesses* was published in 1909, thirteen years later was 1922. Roberts says, “thirteen years ago, to be exact.” The newly printed version of the study, however, omits this crucial phrase, apparently because when Roberts proofread the typescript, he crossed these words out. Still, this telltale phrase clearly dates the writing of the study to 1922.
2. We can tell that Roberts wrote the study before he knew the date of the first edition of *View of the Hebrews*. At that time he had only the second edition and could only speculate that the first was published around 1820. In five handwritten changes, Roberts later changed “1820” to “1823.” When did Roberts learn of the date of the first edition of *View of the Hebrews*? From notes he took in a New York Library, we know he learned this shortly after his arrival in New York, in June 1922.
3. In a letter from Roberts dated October 24, 1927, to Apostle Richard R. Lyman, Roberts says he “dropped” the study when his mission call came. On March 14, 1932, Roberts wrote of the study that it “was from research work I did *before going to take charge of the Eastern States Mission.*”

All these facts and several other similar points show that one should not view the study as a long-time project of Roberts while in New York.

Moreover, the record of Roberts’s testimony is far from “mixed.” His service to the Church from 1922 to his death in 1933 was uninterrupted and unambiguous. He frequently testified of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon as an ancient American scripture. He praised its divinity. He based most of his numerous mission and conference

talks on its messages. He wrote in May 1922 of “the tremendous truth” of the Book of Mormon.³ He said in 1924 that the Saints build upon the Book of Mormon, “wherein is no darkness or doubt.”⁴ He spoke at general conference, April 1928, of the “hundred more such glorious things that have come to the world in that book to enlighten the children of men.”⁵ He spoke repeatedly of the historicity of the book. In 1928 he glorified God for the account of Jesus’ visit to the Nephites in Bountiful: “And now, O Lord Jesus, if thou couldst but come into the consciousness of our souls this day, as thou didst come into the vision of the ancient Nephites in the Land of Bountiful, we would join their great song of praise and worship, saying—’Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed be the name of the Most High God!’ And we, like them, would fall down at the feet of Jesus and worship him this Easter day! Amen.”⁶ This does not sound like a person who had lost faith in the Book of Mormon.

Although Roberts had an “unshaken and unshakable” faith in the Book of Mormon (as he wrote in a cover letter accompanying *Studies*), he knew that as a debater and researcher he had asked questions that might cause some people to wonder about his views. He spoke to this general issue at October Conference in 1929, saying: “After bearing testimony to the fundamental things of this work, and my confidence in it, *I hope that if anywhere along the line I have caused any of you to doubt my faith in this work, then let this testimony and my indicated life’s work be a correction of it.*”⁷

In sum, it seems plain; the evidence is neither “enigmatic” nor “mixed.” Rather, it is quite overwhelming. There is no significant evidence (Wesley Lloyd’s diary included) of “late-in-life doubts.” Questions, yes; uncertainty about weak archaeological evidences, yes; but doubts? This man, who gave fifty-four years of his life in full-time service to his church and to his God, remained firm and true in his testimony of the antiquity and divinity of the Book of Mormon.

This Update was based on research by John W. Welch, November 1985. An expanded treatment appeared a few months later, and a summary appeared in John W. Welch, “B. H. Roberts: Seeker after Truth,” Ensign 16 (March 1986): 56-62. That article was reprinted in A Sure Foundation: Answers to Difficult Gospel Questions (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 60-74.

Further details and documentation are given in “Did B. H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon?” and “Finding Answers to B. H. Roberts’ Questions” (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1985). A substantial collection of all known statements made by Roberts about the Book of Mormon from 1922 until his death in 1933, “B. H. Roberts: His Final Decade: Statements about the Book of Mormon,” has also been published by F.A.R.M.S. in 1985.

Footnotes

1. B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985). For reviews of this book in academic journals, see Thomas G. Alexander, in *Dialogue* 19 (Winter 1986): 190-93; Marvin S. Hill, in *Church History* 55 (December 1986): 546-48; and John W. Welch, in *Pacific Historical Review* 55 (November 1986): 619-23.

2. Roberts, *Studies*, 29-30.

3. B. H. Roberts, “Why Mormonism,” Tract No. 4 (1922), 60-61.

4. B. H. Roberts, “A New Outlook upon Mormonism,” Radio Broadcast (1924), 4.

5. *Conference Report* (April 1928): 112.

6. *Ibid.*, 113.

7. *Conference Report* (October 1929): 90; italics added.