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Robert's Use of Scriptures

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Abstract: By far, the most important sources Roberts used are the four LDS standard works. TWL explicitly accepts the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price as having “equal authority, all of them dependable sources of knowledge”. Although other sources “can be consulted sometimes with profit,” they do not sustain Roberts’s conclusions which, he says, are “so largely influenced by the ‘new knowledge’ brought to light by the Prophet of the New Dispensation, Joseph Smith”.



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He disclaimed accepting these references “as conclusive authorities (except as to citations to the scriptures)” (69).

One must wonder, however, to what extent Roberts actually expected his readers to consult these sources. In many cases, the sources would have been very hard for an average reader to find, and in some chapters the proposed reading assignments are unreasonably broad. For example, for chapter 3, Roberts suggests that the reading of “any general work on psychology” (29) would be good preparation for the study of that chapter. Evidently Roberts gave the general audience a great deal of credit, both in terms of diligence in seeking out these materials and in the ability to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of arguments. In many of the early chapters, one senses that a rather specialized, religiously neutral audience was intended; in many of the later chapters, however, Roberts seems to be addressing a very general, but primarily LDS audience. As he moves farther into the work, he gives fewer and fewer references, and in some chapters none at all besides general scripture assignments.

Roberts’s Use of Scriptures

By far, the most important sources Roberts used are the four LDS standard works. *TWL* explicitly accepts the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price as having “equal authority, all of them dependable sources of knowledge” (276). Although other sources “can be consulted sometimes with profit,” they do not sustain Roberts’s conclusions which, he says, are “so largely influenced by the ‘new knowledge’ brought to light by the Prophet of the New Dispensation, Joseph Smith” (351).

A glance at the scripture index below (753–64) shows that nearly twelve hundred scriptures are cited, and some of them are quoted extensively. They come from the four standard works in approximately the following percentages:

Old Testament	21.0%
New Testament	48.0%
Book of Mormon	9.4%
Doctrine & Covenants	12.2%
Pearl of Great Price	9.4%

Roberts draws most heavily upon Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, the Gospels of John and Matthew, the Epistle to the Hebrews and the letters of John, 2 Nephi, Doctrine and Covenants sections 88 and 93, and the books of Abraham and Moses.

Roberts usually quoted the scriptures accurately, but he sometimes modernized the King James language and blended his quotes into the flow of his own rhetoric. His scriptural interpretations were sometimes tendentious and self-serving, but usually his readings were very literal and tight. The notes and essays below by William Hamblin (652–53), David Seely (654–62), Andrew Skinner (663–70), Richard Roberts (671–76), and Michael Rhodes (677–79) explain specific aspects of Roberts’s use and view of the scriptures, especially in regard to the history of religions, revelation, apostasy, the Old Testament, the Atonement, the New Testament, and the New Dispensation of the gospel.

In general, Roberts did not accept or practice the higher criticism of the Bible current in his day. He makes no use of higher critical methods in *TWL*. One might be tempted to think that if Roberts had only known more about higher criticism he would have somehow embraced the theory; but ample evidence proves that Roberts knew and essentially rejected higher criticism of the Old and New Testaments, especially when it was enlisted in an attempt to discredit the Book of Mormon.

In 1911 Roberts published an article in the *Improvement Era* entitled “Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon.”¹⁹ His views, as manifested in *TWL*, do not differ from the position he took in 1911. In that article, while acknowledging that higher criticism had some good to offer, Roberts began by affirming the reality of prophecy as “history reversed,” realizing that practitioners of critical studies would already be “smiling at such a statement.”²⁰ He willingly renewed his claim that “the Book of Mormon must submit to every test, literary criticism with the rest. Indeed, it must submit to every analysis and examination. It must submit to historical tests, to the tests of archaeological research and also to the higher criticism.”²¹ Roberts exhorted believers to “carry themselves in a spirit of patience and of courage,” and testified that through stress and struggle in studying the Book of Mormon he had arrived at “an absolute conviction of its truth.”²²

Roberts addressed and rejected the arguments of higher criticism. First, he objected that “heavy weights are hung upon very slender threads! The methods, then, of higher criticism we recognize as proper; but we must disagree as to the correctness of many of the conclusions arrived at by that method.”²³ Second, he argued that the Book of Mormon should be used as evidence for dating Isaiah, not vice versa. Third, he pointed out that “the science, so called, of chronology is quite uncertain in its conclusions, and I think I shall be able to satisfy you upon that point; and that this supposed disagreement between higher criticism and the Book of Mormon, as to chronology, is not a point of sufficient moment on which to attempt to overthrow the integrity or

truth of an ancient volume of scripture.”²⁴ Roberts examined alleged chronological discrepancies between the findings of higher critics and the Book of Mormon dating for the reign of Zedekiah and for the birth of Jesus but found the problems to be inconsequential. Fourth, he addressed the problem of Deutero-Isaiah: “Now, here is a real difficulty,” he begins.²⁵ After quoting Driver’s basic conclusions, Roberts told his audience that if they would “read the arguments at length, I promise you that the effect upon your mind of the detailed consideration of the arguments will be to dissipate this strength, it will not appear as strong as it does in these brief and general statements.”²⁶

Why were the critics’ arguments weak? Basically, Roberts argued, because the theory assumes the impossibility of miracles: “Higher critics, as a rule, insist that the miraculous does not happen, that wherever the miraculous appears, there you must halt, and dismiss the miraculous parts of narratives, since they suggest fraud on the one hand and credulity upon the other.”²⁷

After retorting that no candidate to replace Isaiah as the author of Deutero-Isaiah had been proposed by the critics, Roberts rejected the claim of the higher critics “that there is a sharp transition as to matter and style between the 39th chapter and the 40th chapter [of Isaiah]. I modestly beg leave to differ from that conclusion,” and he gave illustrations that show that the second is “in good sequence to the first.”²⁸ In addition, Roberts credited as historical certain statements by Josephus and Jesus affirming Isaiah’s authorship of the latter chapters of the book of Isaiah, and Roberts extolled the vision and literary genius of that great prophet.

Roberts then related a story:

In 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 into higher criticism!” And that is true. The Book of Mormon establishes the integrity and unity of authorship for the whole book of Isaiah.²⁹

After discussing the adverse effects of higher criticism on faith in Jesus Christ as preached in the New Testament, Roberts closed by predicting that advocates of the Book of Mormon would probably be the most tenacious proponents of

the integrity of the whole book of Isaiah as it now stands in the Bible, the product of the prophet of that name, the Messianic prophet *par excellence*, . . . and [they will contend] 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.³⁰

Such was Roberts's view of the assumptions or applications of the prevailing theories of biblical criticism in 1911. These assertions continued to typify Roberts's faithful and vigorous approach to scripture when he wrote *TWL* and until the end of his life.

In *TWL*, Roberts goes out of his way to identify the Book of Mormon as an ancient record written by prophets who lived long ago. He repeatedly reaffirms its divine origin and antiquity, but occasionally he misses opportunities to use Book of Mormon passages that would strongly reinforce his thought. For example, Roberts makes no use of 2 Nephi 31–33, containing some of the most explicit statements in all of scripture about the plan of salvation; and he makes only isolated references to Alma 42, the most extensive scriptural passage on God's mercy and justice—even though these are salient themes in *TWL*.

Indeed, not knowing what we as editors would encounter in the manuscripts of *TWL*, I was surprised to find that *TWL* pointedly and repeatedly asserts the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. While such affirmative statements may seem unremarkable, 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 disappoint anyone who has imagined Roberts as a closet doubter or late-in-life skeptic.

TWL especially reveals how Roberts 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.³¹ Some have seen "Book of Mormon Study" as evidence that Roberts had changed his views on the historicity of the Book of Mormon,³² but readers can now determine that Roberts did not waver in his belief because of that study.

In *TWL*, Roberts describes the miraculous coming forth of the Book of Mormon in strong, straightforward, traditional terms. For example, he says:

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." (469)

In addition Roberts 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” (470).

TWL contains several statements that necessarily assume the antiquity and literal truthfulness of this ancient American scripture. For example, Roberts speaks literally of the words that the resurrected Jesus spoke “to the assembled Nephites to whom he appeared on the Western Continent” (482-83; compare 388, 389). 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” (395), and he used as his key witness the appearance of the resurrected Christ to the Nephites (395).

TWL often identifies Book of Mormon prophets by the centuries in which they lived. Lehi, Roberts says, lived “before the birth of Christ, early in the fifth [*sic*] century, B.C.” (401). Roberts identifies a prophecy in the book of Alma as “one written near the close of the second century B.C.” (401). Moreover, Roberts goes out of his way to describe the book’s authors as “ancient.” He calls Lehi “an ancient American Prophet” (75). He cites “revelations of God to the ancient inhabitants of America” (275). He calls the book “the American volume of Scripture,” written by “the old prophets of the ancient American race” (259; see also 21, 152, 263, 275, 427, 445). He also treats many Book of Mormon passages as the unique, authoritative source of revealed knowledge on important topics. He takes joy in drawing attention to doctrines “derived almost wholly from the teachings of the Book of Mormon” (444). He extols it as a masterful work. Of a Book of Mormon reading he exclaims, “how beautifully clear this principle of purity in thought is set forth” (501).

In a handwritten note on his third draft of *TWL*, Roberts penned the following note: “add ‘other sheep I have’—Christ mission to Western continents. St. John. 10 ch.” (179). This note was added as Roberts went through the manuscript one of the last times. There can be little doubt that the man who wrote such words about the Book of Mormon believed it to be what it claims to be. If Roberts had harbored any doubts, he would not have repeatedly written such words in this work, a work which he considered his magnum opus. Surely this final treatise from the prolific career of B. H. Roberts should also be the final word on his belief in the truth of this “ancient volume of scripture known as the Book of Mormon.”

Roberts was similarly emphatic about the truth and value of the teachings of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. He praises section 93 for its superior comprehension of the definition

of truth and its incomparable disclosures about eternal intelligences. He extols the divine origins of the books of Abraham and Moses, speaking quaintly of the latter as a “Mosaic fragment.”

Use of LDS Sources

Roberts relies very little on LDS sources outside of the scriptures. He quotes a few statements from Joseph Smith, mostly from the King Follett Discourse, and weaves in the words from a few hymns. Beyond very general references to a handful of LDS works—namely, Orson Pratt’s “Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” *Works on the Doctrines of the Gospel*, and “Remarkable Visions”; Parley P. Pratt’s *Key to the Science of Theology*; Franklin D. Richards’s *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel*; James E. Talmage’s *The Articles of Faith* and *The Great Apostasy*; John Taylor’s *Government of God*; and Osborne Widtsoe’s (John A. Widtsoe’s brother) *The Restoration of the Gospel*—no other LDS authors are mentioned. Most conspicuously absent are James E. Talmage’s *Jesus the Christ* (1915) and Joseph F. Smith’s *Gospel Doctrine* (1919).

TWL stands out in sharp relief in comparison with these other works. Unlike the broad approach taken in *TWL* to a wide range of subjects and to several avenues of revelation, Pratt’s *Key to the Science of Theology* focuses primarily on direct communication between God, angels, spirits, and men. Nevertheless, certain similarities between these two works exist: Pratt’s chapter 16 extols the progress of locomotion as evidence of intercommunication between distant planets, as does *TWL* 12; and Pratt’s final chapter 17 ends his treatise with the “Laws of Marriage and Procreation,” as does *TWL* 55. Unlike the theological approach taken in *TWL* to the divinity and atonement of the Christ, Talmage’s *Jesus the Christ* utilizes primarily a biographical and historical framework to present the doctrines of Christ’s life and mission—although Talmage’s chapter 17 and *TWL* 50–51 approach the Sermon on the Mount similarly, and Talmage’s chapter 41 finds parallels in *TWL* 47 on the visions of the Restoration. *Gospel Doctrine* is a compilation of excerpted sayings and writings; its topics include truth, revelation, God and man, and free agency, but otherwise this collection bears little resemblance to the systematic *TWL*.

By a landslide, the favorite author cited by Roberts was Roberts himself. He refers often to many of his prior publications. Although *TWL* did not see publication during Roberts’s lifetime, many chapters were either drawn extensively from or were used substantially in other books, articles, or talks that Roberts published or delivered