

U. of U. Scholars Rebuke BYU Professors In Dispute Over LDS Historian's Papers

By Dawn Tracy
Tribune Staff Writer

Two University of Utah scholars, who have publicized LDS historian B. H. Roberts' private papers questioning the Book of Mormon, have rebuked two Brigham Young University professors for "attacking their integrity" in an attempt to persuade readers that Roberts didn't mean what he wrote.

The scholars, Sterling M. McMurrin, E. E. Erickson distinguished professor, and Brigham D. Madsen, professor emeritus of history, were involved in publishing controversial papers written by Roberts (1857-1933), foremost LDS historian and theologian and well-known defender of the Book of Mormon, who wrestled privately with the book's historical authenticity.

BYU professor of philosophy Truman G. Madsen and BYU law professor John W. Welch contend in a 100-page "preliminary report" that the U. of U. professors have been careless, inaccurate, incomplete, uninformed, biased and ignored the fact that Roberts had played devil's advocate in questioning the Book of Mormon. "These editors are subtler and more sophisticated than the typical anti-Mormons. But their product is little better," wrote Truman Madsen, no relation to Brigham Madsen, in a report distributed by the Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies at BYU.

Dr. McMurrin replied in an address before the Algje Ballif Forum on March 22 in Provo: "The document is not a discussion of the Roberts' book but is a personal attack on Brigham and me in an attempt to dissuade people that Roberts didn't mean what he said. They call the report preliminary but if that's so, why are they selling it for \$4 apiece? If they hadn't been selling this stuff we would have laughed the whole thing off."

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe church founder Joseph Smith was not the author of the Book of Mormon but translated the book from golden plates through divine guidance. LDS Church leaders have made this belief a "litmus test" to determine orthodoxy, according to Brigham Madsen.

In *Studies of the Book of Mormon* (edited by Brigham Madsen with a biographical essay by Dr. McMurrin), Roberts wrote that the evidence "I sorrowfully submit" points to Joseph Smith as "creator" of the Book of Mormon. Roberts was troubled by anachronistic descriptions, steel, silk, wheeled vehicles and horses in the Americas. Historians say these things didn't exist in this hemisphere until long after the period described in the Book of Mormon.

Roberts didn't express these or other questions publicly. In the 1920s he wrote to the church's First Presidency that he had come upon an "embarrassing" theory because of similarities between the Book of Mormon and Ethan Smith's "View of the Hebrews." The latter work, published in 1823 and again in 1825, was written by a New England minister who had a church in the same town where Oliver Cowdery, later a scribe to Joseph Smith, lived until 1825. Roberts wrote that the "cumulative force" of similarities between "View of the Hebrews" and the Book of Mormon poses a "menace to Joseph Smith's story" of the Book of Mormon's origin.

Brigham Madsen and Dr. McMurrin said two branches of the Roberts' family donated the manuscripts to the U. of U.'s Marriott Library, and requested that the material be published. Money from sales of the book published by the U. of U. went to the

to the U. of U. library's Special Collections division.

Publication prompted the FARMS organization to issue a report answering Roberts' private questions on the Book of Mormon as well as sharply critical reviews. "The editors of these papers have been [guilty of] some careless errors and have been selective," wrote Dr. Welch in one report. "This may have been the result of benign ignorance or of a lulling bias. Whatever the cause, the facts behind this indictment are clear. The case is open and shut."

Dr. McMurrin countered, "Please understand that neither Brigham Madsen nor I object to critical reviews of the Roberts' volume, reviews that not only analyze Roberts but as well are critical of our handling of the subject. What we object to is the simple *ad hominem* attack on us personally in the guise of a discussion of the book."

Dr. Welch argues that those who suggest Roberts lost faith will have a hard time accounting for Roberts' almost obsessive religious use of the Book of Mormon throughout his life. A more complete representation of Roberts' writings will show that Roberts never lost faith, he contends. Dr. McMurrin said neither he nor Brigham Madsen have concluded that Roberts lost faith in the Book of Mormon, and they encourage readers to examine Roberts' private letters affirming his faith that are included in the book.

The controversy extends to a journal entry of the late Wesley P. Lloyd, who recorded a 1922 meeting Roberts had with LDS General Authorities to present problems he had encountered with the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Lloyd recorded an interview shortly before Roberts' death in which Roberts remembered church leaders' reaction to his presentation.

"In answer, they merely one by one stood up and bore testimony to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon," recorded Lloyd. "[later LDS President] George Albert Smith in tears testified that his faith in the book had not been shaken by the question."

Dr. Welch, however, wrote that Lloyd was not reliable as a reporter because he had many facts wrong in his journal entry. Lloyd, for instance, recorded that Roberts' study of the Book of Mormon was done during 1922, not later, and that the document was 450 pages, not 400. The church never had a copy, as Lloyd stated, nor was it presented to the LDS church president.

Brigham Madsen said Dr. Welch attempts to discredit Lloyd by pointing out a few minor discrepancies in the journal. "As every historian knows, one of the more accurate sources of historical information is a journal entry written immediately after the incident reported." BYU later considered Lloyd "reliable enough to entrust him with the top academic post in any university. Dean of the Graduate School," said Brigham Madsen. "And as one who knew Dean Lloyd personally and his high sense of integrity and honesty, he and Brigham Young University deserve better from one of that institution's present faculty members."

Dr. Welch said in a prepared statement: "Reasonable men can differ over what B. H. Roberts was saying in these papers. They [McMurrin and Brigham Madsen] think you should look almost exclusively to the papers themselves to find an answer to this. I think more weight should be given to what Roberts himself said about these papers and about the Book of Mormon after