

PART II

DID B. H. ROBERTS LOSE FAITH
IN THE BOOK OF MORMON?

COMMENTS ON STERLING MCMURRIN'S BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

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If an editor at Oxford University Press had been assigned to evaluate Sterling McMurrin's "Brigham H. Roberts: A Biographical Essay" as a possible introductory chapter in a book of selected writings by Roberts about the Book of Mormon, here is what the editor might have said:

"This essay tells me more about McMurrin than about Roberts. It reads more like a nostalgic romantic essay than an objective historical treatment of Roberts. It is full of irrelevancies: for example, the point that 'Roberts seriously neglected discussion of fundamental moral philosophy?' p. xxvi. This sounds like something only a moral philosopher would say. What is McMurrin's background anyway?

"For the most part, the essay does not seem to be very helpful or appropriate as an introduction to papers on the Book of Mormon. McMurrin mentions the Book of Mormon every now and then, but not often. Roberts' Book of Mormon studies do not seem to be the primary concern on his mind. A reader might want to see his points related more often to the material he is purportedly helping to introduce.

"For example, I like the way he presents Roberts as raw talent and explains the informality of Roberts' education. One would like to know what McMurrin thinks this can tell us about the raw and unfinished state of the Book of Mormon Study. Likewise, McMurrin's point is an important one--that Roberts only shows good research skills in his Mormon historical work.

✓ McMurrin says that 'elsewhere'--and I assume that means in these Studies--Roberts 'was very dependent on secondary sources' from which he quoted so much that the reader cannot tell Roberts' ideas from those he is quoting. p. xxv. From what little I have seen of the Study, it seems to be full of long quotations from secondary sources. Maybe we could get McMurrin to help us know when Roberts is quoting these things to represent Roberts' own ideas and when not.

"I think McMurrin is also on to something important when he comments on Roberts' personality as a debater. What a colorful Church leader Roberts must have been! Hardly the sombre old stereotyped Mormon puritan I am used to thinking of (which makes me wonder too about McMurrin's caricature of Mormonism as running its mainstream out of 'watered-down Puritanism,' p. xiv). I became quite intrigued by McMurrin's insights into Roberts' personality, pp. xx-xxi. All the talk about Roberts' emotional and passionate oratory, forensic skills, forceful pen, 'impetuous speech,' 'endless battle with critics,' aggressiveness, readiness to take all comers, with a prose style that is 'rhetorical and dramatic,' direct and often repetitive, 'sometimes careless in construction,' but always to the point and effective, 'argumentative and polemical'--all this really got me wondering about the nature of these Book of Mormon studies. How deeply felt were these arguments which Roberts is presenting against his own Book of Mormon? Could we somehow get McMurrin to talk a little about the Study itself in this light? Debaters, after all, are trained to argue both sides of the case, even if they only believe in one side. If Roberts 'enjoyed nothing more than argument,' and 'was his best in a good fight,' maybe Roberts is just having fun with us here. When McMurrin says that if Roberts could not see a debate in sight, he 'would produce a battle by monologue,' p. xxi, does McMurrin not think that Roberts is doing that here?

"I get worried enough about introductions which seem to have hidden agendas. In this instance my concerns are even greater since it is obvious that McMurrin's agenda is not even thinly

✓ camouflaged. It seems inappropriate to me for McMurrin to use this supposed discussion of Roberts as a platform for McMurrin's own romantic views of some by-gone good old 'rationalist' day in Mormon Church history, or to take pot-shots at current intellectual conditions in the Mormon Church, or to pass judgment on whether the Mormon Church has 'downgraded' the First Council of Seventy (p. xx), or to label Mormon doctrine 'heresy' (p. xxvii) and merely a product of nineteenth century American thought (pp. xiv), or to vent his own problems with what he calls 'intellectually frustrating scriptural literalism' (p. xxv). None of these ideas have anything significant to do with Roberts. To whom is scriptural literalism intellectually frustrating? To Roberts? or to McMurrin?

"McMurrin is quick to praise Roberts for his 'admirable honesty' and 'sincerity,' and for his 'sincere desire to be honest and open with his readers' (p. xxii)--and I read into this a not-too-subtle and possibly unfair implication that McMurrin is accusing other Mormon writers of not being so open and honest. Yet, for a person so eager to praise openness and sincerity, McMurrin is less than candid about his own agenda and motives. I don't think we as a reputable press would want to get caught printing something as two-faced as this.

"What should we do about McMurrin's value judgments of Roberts' work? Usually we want our introducers to set the stage and let the readers draw their own conclusions. For example, it should be enough for McMurrin just to point out that Roberts' histories (which, by the way, is where I thought McMurrin thought Roberts was at his research-best) are 'altogether too simple.' p. xxiii. He should not go on to tell the reader that this is a 'serious defect' for which Roberts 'partially atones' by writing the Study. p. xxiii. It does not appear that Roberts thought he was atoning for past sins.

"And if McMurrin is going to be preferential, let him not foreclose others from pursuing avenues which might be well worth studying. McMurrin makes it clear that he thinks the Roberts' Book of Mormon Study is worthy of serious attention just because

Roberts was a 'key figure in the intellectual history of the Church,' the 'record' would not be complete without his unpublished papers. p. xix. But then I cannot at the same time understand how McMurrin can bald-facedly assert that 'Roberts's efforts to reconcile the findings of science with a liberalized biblical literalism' are not deserving of 'serious attention today.' p. xxviii. If one thing is worthy of being in the record just because it was written by this key Mormon figure, it would seem that the next thing is equally worthy. I wonder if this McMurrin fellow has ever had a course in logic.

"Which brings me to another inconsistency I am rather troubled about here. On page xviii, McMurrin mentions that Truman Madsen devotes a whole chapter to an unpublished manuscript called 'The Truth, the Way, the Life.' I became more intrigued when I saw this same unpublished manuscript mentioned in footnote 15, where (as if to bury this fact too deeply for an average reader to find) McMurrin says that this manuscript was written in the 1920s. This was the same decade as these Book of Mormon Studies. Troubled enough by the way in which McMurrin dismisses Roberts' ideas in this late-in-life book as 'aberrational' (this looks like an attempt to exclude it from the record), I did some checking. I found, much to my astonishment, that not only did Roberts write this book-length manuscript several years after he wrote the Book of Mormon Study but in it he unqualifiedly accepts the divine origin of the Book of Mormon. Since McMurrin has accused Truman Madsen of not telling the whole story, this is the pot calling the kettle black. Surely we cannot touch this kind of stuff without getting our own hands soiled.

"On the other hand, maybe we should think about publishing 'The Way, the Truth, the Life.' After all, it is more 'unpublished' than the Study, since I understand that the Study has been available for sale for several years to anyone who wanted it. I wonder why McMurrin and Brigham Madsen haven't suggested or pushed the idea of publishing that manuscript, since they seem so concerned about making sure the record is complete.

Also, if they were interested in completeness, I wondered why they omitted Roberts' letter to Elizabeth Skolfield from the 'Correspondence Related to the Book of Mormon Essays' when the letter is relevant and was known to them (p. 346). This is beginning to smell rather bad.

"I like the way that McMurrin admires Roberts for his honesty and maturity in later life. For a while I thought we were really lucky as a press to get the opportunity to publish the Study, since the promoters of this publication seem to view this as the crowning achievement of Roberts' life. But then I got wondering, if it is true, as McMurrin says, that Roberts 'was intellectually alive to the very last, a person whose later maturity increased not only his wisdom and the general quality of his thought but also his determination to find the truth about the things that for him mattered most,' p. xxviii, then we really ought to be even more interested in the last eleven years of Roberts, from 1922-33. There, McMurrin tells us, we will find what mattered most to Roberts. There we will find Roberts in his most mature prime. As I checked into this, however, I found that the later Roberts was unchanged in his faith. He twice reprinted in the late 1920s his earlier volumes on the Book of Mormon entitled New Witnesses for God. Then too is when he wrote 'The Way, the Truth, the Life,' as well as 'Rasha, the Jew.' In 'Rasha,' Roberts even tries to convince a stubborn Jew that the Book of Mormon will convert him to Christ! This is also when he wrote his Comprehensive History of the Church, which is as orthodox as the Pope. Even his dozens of tracts and addresses are vintage Roberts. If these are the things that McMurrin thinks 'mattered most' to Roberts, we as a reputable press must be careful in passing the Study off as an enlightened crowning masterpiece.

"I also became concerned that we should not publish McMurrin's essay alongside Brigham Madsen's until the two of them might get together on a few important points. Madsen says that the March 15, 1923 letter was 'never sent' and the Study never submitted (pp. 58-59), but McMurrin says that the reading of the manuscript resulted in a 'controversy' (p. xvii). Madsen says

that we may never know whether Roberts 'retained his belief in the Book of Mormon' (p. 30), but McMurrin says that 'Roberts held and reaffirmed' his faith in the authenticity of this distinctive scripture 'on many occasions' (p. xvi). I wish we could get a bit of this straight.

"Another part of my problem came when I compared what McMurrin says Roberts says with what Roberts really says. McMurrin speaks of what Roberts 'concluded' in the Study: that he 'found that a literary analysis does not support the authenticity of the book,' that he makes 'statements in his study that would appear to explicitly express a conviction that it is not authentic,' and that he drew 'conclusions' (pp. xvii-xviii, xxxi n. 13). My hopes were raised by these assertions that at last I would learn what Roberts really believed about all of this. But when I went looking, my hopes were dashed, for all I found was Roberts raising a lot of titillating rhetorical questions and stating a lot of possible positions that reasonable critics of the Book of Mormon might take. At least in England, analytic logicians distinguish between 'questions' and 'statements.'

"Finally, I became curious about what has happened with Book of Mormon studies generally since Roberts' day. After all, it has been over 60 years since these Studies were written. Finding it hard to believe that Mormon scholars have produced 'nothing more impressive' than what Roberts wrote in 1909 (as McMurrin claims, p. xvi), I checked at Blackwell's, at the Bodleian, and made some telephone calls. My superficial looking turned up several intriguing titles by Hugh Nibley and others. I became puzzled as to why McMurrin ignores this sizeable body of research.

"To sum up, I must say I am mildly in favor of publishing these intriguing papers, but not until these serious problems are corrected. In any case, it is not clear to me that McMurrin would be the right person to ask to write the kind of essay we would be interested in printing. I think we ought to look for someone else. I understand that there is a real philosophical

spokesman for Mormon intellectuals out in Salt Lake City. I think he used to be some kind of commissioner of education and now has a chair in the History Department at the University of Utah. Maybe he would be a good person to ask.

Whatever happens, I hope that Mormon essayists can get away from the kind of ax grinding and blatantly biased writing that I have found in this particular essay. I think they had better beat a few of their academic swords into plowshares, for I understand there is a lot of academic ground out West that still needs to be profitably cultivated."