A Masterwork of Mormon Theology?

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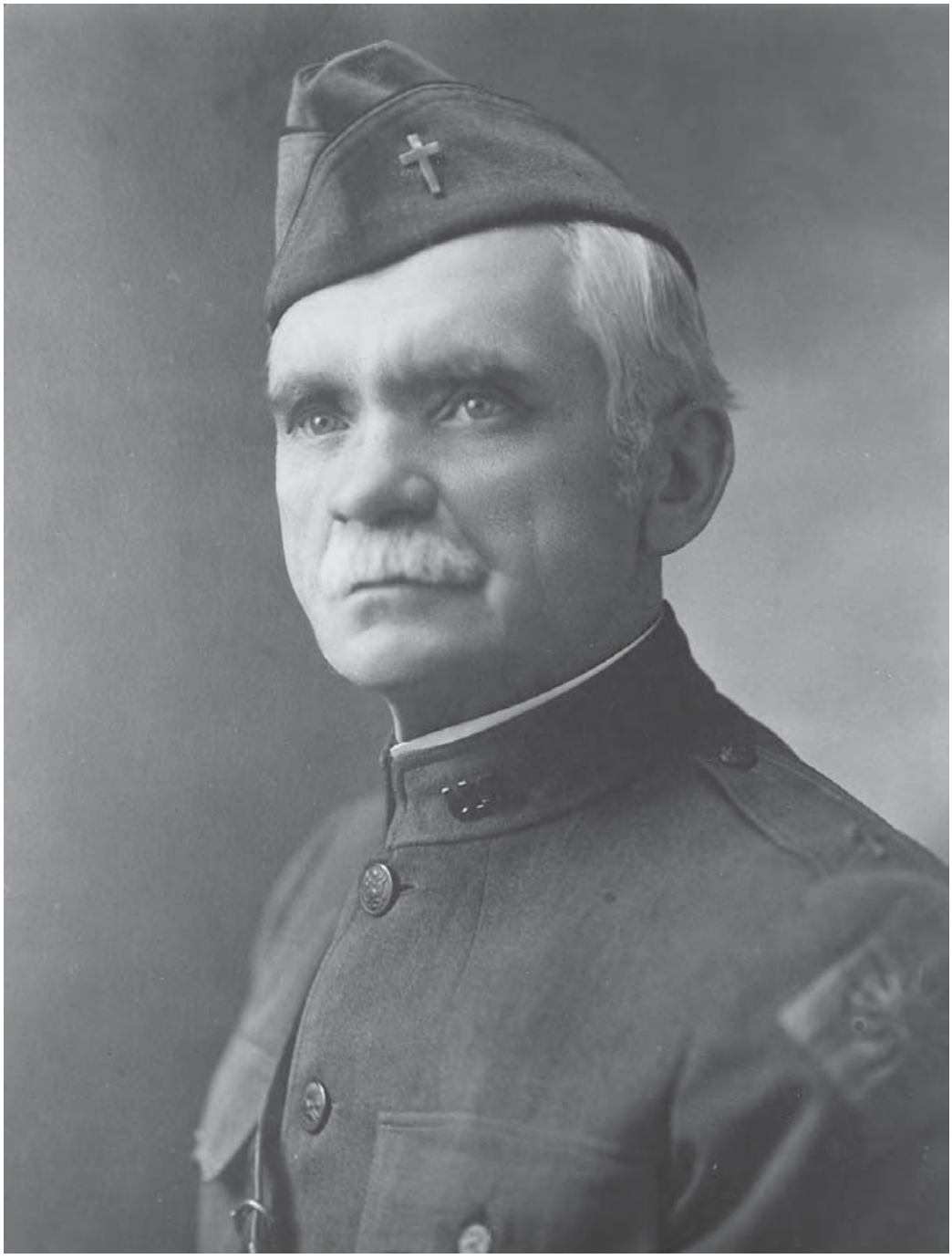
Source: *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology (2nd Edition)*
Editor(s): John W. Welch
Published: Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1996
Page(s): 560–567



B. H. Roberts ca. 1918. Although over sixty, Roberts served as chaplain of the U.S. Army 145th Artillery Unit after passing the standard qualifying academic and physical tests at the Officers and Chaplains School. Courtesy LDS Church Archives.

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Davis Bitton

Most General Authorities in the LDS Church from the beginning to the present have worked quietly, often behind the scenes. Results have counted, not flamboyance. Yet some members of that impressive corps of leaders have displayed a more demonstrative style. Larger than life, these few are especially noticed while alive and are expansively remembered in subsequent generations. For forty or fifty years, from the 1880s to the 1930s, one of these "stars" was B. H. Roberts.

In Roberts's day, General Authorities included only the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the First Council of the Seventy, and the Church Patriarch. So, when Roberts became one of the seven members of the First Council of Seventy at the age of thirty-one, he entered the ranks of a relatively small group of twenty-three General Authorities, with whom he associated closely and shared many responsibilities.

Within this group of twenty-three, B. H. Roberts stood out, as if a spotlight were on him. What made him different? (I do not say greater or even more effective—distinctions that Roberts never would have claimed for himself.) Although the intangibles of his charisma may elude definition, four characteristics can be noted:

1. He had a distinctive appearance. With his head of white hair and walrus mustache, Roberts was easily recognized in his later years. People sitting in the Salt Lake Tabernacle would whisper to each other as they pointed him out, "That's B. H. Roberts." As he participated in stake conferences—indeed, as he appeared in any public setting—he was noticed.

2. He was a fighter. Along the spectrum of human temperaments, some are timid or relatively placid, while others are more combative. Shaped by a life of challenges that developed his toughness, Roberts moved through a series of controversies.[1] His life can be fruitfully considered as a series of confrontations: in the mission field he faced not merely verbal denunciation but the murder of fellow missionaries;

he opposed female suffrage at the Utah Constitutional Convention in 1895; he spoke out for his political convictions, often at variance with other Church leaders; he precipitated the "political manifesto" by which General Authorities were required to receive permission from the First Presidency before running for political office; he won an election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1898 and then fought unsuccessfully to retain his seat;[2] he defended the role and authority of the Seventy within the councils of Church governance.[3] In addition, he frequently jumped into the theological fray, defending "the faith and the Saints" against outside critics. At the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, he insisted that the Church be treated as one of the world's major religions.[4] He was a scrapper. Since many of these controversies were known to the public, he was in the public eye. One can imagine present-day news reporters, including radio and television people, gravitating to him irresistibly. He was eminently quotable, always newsworthy.

3. He was an orator. His natural fluency as a speaker captured his audiences. After polishing both his speaking and debating skills in his youthful Mutual Improvement experience, he entered the mission field during an era that still valued oratory. The restrained style of "talking heads" now familiar from television was far in the future. In order to reach audiences, speakers had to project; this meant speaking loudly, even shouting at times, and it also included variations of pace and volume. Daniel Webster and others had perpetuated the oratorical ideal of the early American republic; at the end of the nineteenth century, the great exemplar was William Jennings Bryan. Against such a backdrop of eloquence and refinement, Roberts became known as the "blacksmith orator" while still a young man and went on to be widely acknowledged as Mormonism's leading orator. In reading his addresses, modern readers can still detect a special tang. What we miss, of course, is the three-dimensional experience. We have to imagine Roberts's slow beginnings, the changes of tempo, the build-up to a climax, the flashing eyes. Although these talks were not written out in advance, they were prepared. While Roberts relied on the Spirit, he had also filled his mind with ideas and scriptural references. He was indeed a memorable public speaker.

4. He was an intellectual. I hesitate to use a term that is so easily misunderstood and is not always considered a compliment. For present purposes, I mean that Roberts was a man of ideas who wrote and published articles and books. In that restricted sense, intellectualism is no prerequisite for service in the Church, even on the highest levels, but undeniably it enlarged the scope of Roberts's influence. People who saw Church periodicals, lesson manuals, and books frequently

encountered the name of B. H. Roberts. Possessed of an irrepressible desire to communicate his ideas in writing, he started in the 1880s accumulating journalistic experience with the *Millennial Star* in Liverpool and the *Salt Lake Herald* in Utah. He went on to publish tracts, articles, a play, and books on just about everything relating to Mormonism. He was counted as one of the ten greatest Utahns during his lifetime, and he is regularly listed among the top LDS theologians and historians of his generation.[5] Being an intellectual did not prevent him from being also a man of great faith, a combination not common in the twentieth century. He was not alone in this respect, but his combination of intellectual interests and faith made him stand out as an unusual figure among the General Authorities of the Church.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. None of the four qualities I have described here is indispensable to effective service. Personally, I have learned to value the quieter qualities in many Church leaders. But B. H. Roberts, with his unique combination of traits, was also someone who contributed mightily. This exceptional mix made him a figure of constant interest and made his speeches and the products of his pen newsworthy.

These ruminations bring me to *The Truth, The Way, The Life,* now published some sixty years after Roberts wrote it. While others comment on its specific philosophical and theological aspects, my observations are more general.

First, notice the work's enormous scope. Roberts was nothing if not ambitious. His treatise was to be "a search for the truth, as it relates to the universe and to man; a consideration of the way as it relates to the attainment of those ends which may be learned as to the purpose of man's earth-existence; and the contemplation of the life that will result from the knowledge of the truth and the way" (15). That's all.

Next, observe Roberts's style. His writing, like his public speaking, was strong, muscular. He had a distinctive voice. When he indulged in speculation—not the kind of thing found in committee-produced, cautiously correlated, or overedited articles or manuals—Roberts knew that he had proved nothing. In the manner of Joseph Butler's celebrated *Analogy of Religion,* Roberts strove to make a presumptive case based on expectations from the natural world. More than that, behind his sometimes tendentious and sophistic logic one always detects a passionate human being, never lacking in a strong self-image.

But aside from acknowledging its vast ambition and vivid writing, how does one evaluate a work like *TWL?* Mainly, I suggest, *TWL* can be evaluated in three contexts.

One context is Roberts's own intellectual-spiritual evolution. To appreciate this evolution, one would need to retrace Roberts's biography and, in so doing, not assume that he had read and mastered everything while still young.[6] Without attempting that challenging biographical project here, one can at least recognize that Roberts's published works are a series of milestones along the road of his development. Christian ecclesiastical history, controversy over succession after the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith, theological confrontations with opponents, defenses of the Pearl of Great Price and the Book of Mormon,[7] extensive editorial work in assembling documents of early Mormonism, narrations of different phases of Mormon history, a culminating comprehensive history—such were the written projects that extended over much of Roberts's adult life. Understandably, he felt that he had paid his dues and was equipped to produce a great work of synthesis. He was not someone new to the subject. One can imagine the satisfaction with which, in the late 1920s, he contemplated his *Comprehensive History* and *TWL* as the twin crowning achievements of his written corpus.

A second, larger context is that of all LDS writings—works written about Mormonism by Mormons for Mormons. Which titles stand out? Theological or scriptural studies of genuine merit or distinctive style have been relatively few. Besides books compiled from the sermons and writings by Church presidents, almost any list of significant LDS works from Mormonism's first century would have to include titles by Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, James E. Talmage, and B. H. Roberts. (Later, one would add John A. Widtsoe, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Bruce R. McConkie, all very prolific.) Having already contributed significantly in history and theological polemic, Roberts saw *TWL* as a culmination, a massive *summa* that distilled his best religious thought, just as *Comprehensive History* was his magisterial historical work. Had *TWL* been published in the early 1930s, it would doubtless have established itself as a landmark. Not that it would have swept everything else aside. On the subject of Jesus Christ, for example, the chapters that Roberts devotes to Jesus Christ, while moving, would scarcely have replaced Talmage's *Jesus the Christ.* And the issues which led to controversy and the insistence on revision before publication could not be avoided. Roberts's book, had it been published, might have seemed authoritative; but even when Talmage published "The Earth and Man"[8] in 1931, those who took a different stance did not consider the issue settled. Clearly, however, *TWL* is on the same plane as those few other works considered to be classic statements of Mormon belief at the end of the Church's first century. In its efforts to set forth the basic truths of the restored gospel, it has sweep and excitement.

I have found by experience that I need to clarify this point. To say that Susie wrote the best essay in the class may or may not be high praise, depending on the quality of the class's work. To say that Roberts had produced one of the leading theological works during Mormonism's first hundred years is not necessarily to say that *TWL* was magnificent. Others may disagree, but I do not see that the early Saints manifested very much high intellectual or literary genius in theological publications.

Third, if the field of comparison is enlarged one step further, one quickly recognizes that *TWL* has serious limitations. How does *TWL* measure up against other theological, historical, or philosophical contributions produced during the first thirty years of the twentieth century? Is it, in other words, truly a major achievement when matched against the world's standards of intellectual and inspirational achievement? Roberts, of course, was quite willing to engage leading thinkers by reading and reacting to them. In philosophy he was familiar with Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill, Henri Bergson, John Fiske, and William James. In religion he studied works by Ernst Haeckel, Oliver Lodge, Henry L. Mansel, and Sabine Baring-Gould. Interested in the relationship between science and religion, Roberts had read standard histories by John William Draper and Andrew D. White, along with specific treatments of evolution by G. H. Howison, Richard S. Lull, and F. W. Headley. Roberts's knowledge of Judeo-Christian history was derived primarily from the Bible, supplemented by Josephus, Mosheim, Neander, Edersheim, and Shedd. He was versed in Shakespeare and Emerson. Considering that Roberts was essentially self-educated, such a range of reading is impressive. He was a voracious reader, one who was anxious to seek knowledge "out of the best books." What other Church leader has mustered such a range of works, relating them to Latter-day Saint beliefs?

Yet the verve and enthusiasm of the amateur carried certain limitations. If Darwin is addressed, at least as interpreted through Spencer and Fiske, where are those other two giants, Marx and Freud? Max Weber seems to have eluded Roberts. Where is Feuerbach? And the clergyman Baring-Gould is not really an adequate substitute for Sir James Frazier. For the study of the New Testament, drawing on the work of the venerable Edersheim does not make up for ducking the critical challenges from David Friedrich Strauss and Ernst Renan. Lacking competence in any foreign languages, Roberts could not enter into direct dialogue with the works of Continental thinkers, but even the European works in translation are barely sampled.

In the area of science, Roberts was the interested amateur, totally dependent upon works of popularization, especially magazines (which are

not to be confused with learned journals). Roberts moved somewhat beyond this point on the subject of evolution, where he consulted six or eight books, but even here one cannot say that he was anything but a rank amateur. In addition, nothing indicates that he understood the Einsteinian revolution. Mormons wishing to explore the basic issues between science and religion may find *TWL* casually interesting as a reflection of the state of affairs in the Church around 1930, but to approach the subject responsibly, they must move on to other authors.

If the foregoing seems like a heartless criticism, readers should remember that I am not evaluating the life of B. H. Roberts, but a book. An evaluation of this book according to the canons of scholarship, and examinations of its use of source materials and the way it would have contributed to the different fields covered, lead to an inescapable conclusion: while Roberts might have instructed and challenged the Mormon population, what he tried to say beyond an LDS circle would never have been heard due to his failure to conduct the necessary homework and to confront the issues in language that would communicate outside his own religious community. He probably did not place primary emphasis on such a goal, intending mainly to instruct fellow Mormons, but readers should be under no illusions: *TWL* is not a work of stature on the large stage of intellectual history. Had *TWL* been published in 1931 or soon thereafter, however exciting it might have been to some Mormon readers, it would not likely have been noticed elsewhere.

Of course, saying that Roberts or anyone else failed to be aware of later developments is not a valid criticism. But let me mention the obvious on this score anyway: if *TWL* was inadequately grounded in the 1920s, its scholarship is hopelessly out of date in the 1990s. The flow of scholarship has produced a veritable flood in religious history, biblical studies, science, philosophy of science, epistemology, and many other subjects. It is an understatement, therefore, to say that *TWL* is largely unrelated to many present concerns.

Roberts's ambitious study has its problems, and the manuscripts are rife with minor textual errors. Yet despite its flaws, *TWL* was a major achievement in its day. Furthermore, although it is only one piece of the puzzle, *TWL* tells us something of the unresolved issues occupying some attention of the Church, or at least of some individuals within the Church, at the time.

In 1931, hoping to garner support for the book's publication, Roberts wrote to his friend President Heber J. Grant that *TWL* was "the most important work that I have yet contributed to the Church, the six-volumed *Comprehensive History* . . . not omitted."[9] Roberts may have been right. But just as one should be aware when reading the

Comprehensive History that it has been superseded on many points, so one should read *TWL*. The words of B. H. Roberts are not definitive—beyond the scriptures, what book ever is?—but intelligent readers can still enjoy and benefit from many of his words.

NOTES

[1]The standard biography is Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980).

[2]Davis Bitton, "The Exclusion of B. H. Roberts from Congress," in Bitton, *The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), ch. 8.

[3]See Gary J. Bergera, ed., *The Autobiography of B. H. Roberts* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1990), ch. 26.

[4]Davis Bitton, "B. H. Roberts at the World Parliament of Religions, 1893," *Sunstone* 7 (January–February 1982): 46–51.

[5]Davis Bitton, "B. H. Roberts as Historian," *Dialogue* 3 (Winter 1968): 25–44; revised as "B. H. Roberts: Historian and Theologian," in Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, eds., *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 69–86. In the 1930s, Salt Lake newspapers listed Roberts fourth on the list of ten "greatest living Utahns." When fifty prominent Mormon intellectuals in the 1960s were asked to list the five most eminent intellectuals in Mormon history, thirty-eight respondents nominated B. H. Roberts at the top. Leonard Arrington, "The Intellectual Tradition of the Latter-day Saints," *Dialogue* 4 (Spring 1969): 13–26. That poll, although not very scientific, has recently been repeated, with the same result. Stan Larson, "Intellectuals in Mormon History: An Update," *Dialogue* 26 (Fall 1993): 187–89.

[6]His biographers too readily attribute the command of his later life to the time of his youth.

[7]The chronological dynamics of Roberts's attitude toward his Mormon faith have been complicated by a study he completed in 1922 on the Book of Mormon. Intended for private circulation among fellow General Authorities, the study was published with accompanying editorial comments that suggest that Roberts had abandoned his belief in the Book of Mormon. B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). For a discussion of this subject, see pages 687–91 and accompanying notes in this volume.

[8]James E. Talmage, "The Earth and Man," *Millennial Star* 93 (December 31, 1931): 849–55, 857–63.

[9]Roberts to Heber J. Grant, February 9, 1931. The fact that Roberts was indulging in a bit of overappraisal is seen in his failure to mention *TWL* at all in his autobiography, whereas he discusses the *Comprehensive History of the Church* thoroughly. See Bergera, *Autobiography of B. H. Roberts,* 226–29.