



## BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>

---

### The Probability of Joseph Smith's Story - I

Author(s): B.H. Roberts

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (March 1904), pp. 321-331.

Published by: Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association

---

# IMPROVEMENT ERA.

---

VOL. VII.

MARCH, 1904.

No. 5.

---

## THE PROBABILITY OF JOSEPH SMITH'S STORY.

---

BY ELDER B. H. ROBERTS.

### I.

By the probability of Joseph Smith's story, I mean, of course, the probability of the truth of his story concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—of Moroni revealing its existence to him—of Moroni delivering to him the plates and Urim and Thummim—of his translating the record by the gift and power of God, by means of the Urim and Thummim—of his returning the plates to Moroni, who to this day, doubtless, has them in charge.

I am aware of the fact that the miraculous is usually regarded with suspicion; that such a thing as the ministration of angels in what are called these "hard and scientific times" is generally scouted by most of those who make any pretensions to science; that a school of scholars has arisen whose main principle in the search of truth is that the miraculous is the impossible, and that all narratives which include the miraculous are to be rigidly rejected, as implying credulity or imposture; that even professed believers in the Bible, who accept as historically true the Bible account of the ministration of angels, insist that the age in which such things occurred has long since passed away and that such ministra-

tions are not to be expected now.\* But on this subject the word of God stands sure. According to that word there have been ministrations of angels in times past; and there will be such ministrations to the last day of recorded time. As to the ministration of angels in the past, according to holy scripture, the reader will call to mind the circumstance of angels together with the Lord, visiting Abraham at his tent-home in the plains of Mamre, and partaking of his hospitality; of the appearance of angels to direct the flight of Lot from one of the doomed cities of the plain; of Jacob's physical contact with the angel with whom he wrestled until the breaking of the day; of the angel who went before the camp of Israel in its march from bondage, and scores of other instances recorded in the Old Testament where heavenly personages co-operated with men on earth to bring to pass the holy purposes of God.

Of instances in the New Testament, the reader will recall the ministration of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias, announcing the future birth of John the Baptist; of the angel who appeared to Mary to make known the high honor bestowed upon her in becoming the mother of our Lord Jesus; of the appearance of Moses and Elias to the Savior and three of his disciples, to whom they ministered; of the angel who rolled away the stone from the mouth of the sepulchre, and announced the resurrection of the Savior; of the men in white (angels) who were present at the ascension of Jesus from the midst of his disciples, and announced the fact that the time would come when that same Jesus should come again to the earth in like manner as they had seen him go into heaven; of the angel who delivered Peter from prison, and a dozen other instances where angels co-operated with men in bringing to pass the purposes of God in the dispensation of the meridian of time.

With reference to the angels who in ages future from that in which the apostles lived ministering to men and co-operating to bring to pass future purposes of God, the reader will recall the saying of the Savior concerning the gathering together of the elect in the hour of God's judgment: "and he shall send his angels with

---

\*See "Life of Jesus," Renan, (E. T.) Introduction; also "New Witnesses," vol. I, chapter 1.

a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other;”\* he will recall, also, the promise in Malachi concerning the same times: “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse;”† he will recollect the promised coming of the angel to restore the gospel in the hour of God’s judgment: “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters;”‡ also the angel who will declare the fall of Babylon, “And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication. And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, if any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God.”§ “And after these things I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power, and the earth was lighted with his glory. And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit.”|| The reader of the scriptures, I say, will readily recall all these ministrations of angels; as also the promise of the ministrations of many other angels, in bringing to pass the great things of God in the last days, even to the gathering together in one all things in Christ.\*\*

It cannot be held as unscriptural, then, when Joseph Smith claimed that by the ministration of angels he received a revelation from God—a dispensation of the Gospel.

Then, again, whatever the position of unbelievers in the Bible may be with reference to Joseph Smith translating the Book of

---

\*Matt. xxiv: 31. † Malachi iv: 5, 6. ‡ Revelation xiv: 6, 7. § Rev. xiv: 8, 9, 10. || Rev. xviii: 1-3. \*\* Ephesians i: 9, 10.

Mormon by means of Urim and Thummim, or "Interpreters," as they were called by the Nephites, surely believers in the Bible cannot regard such a claim as impossible or improbable, since it is matter of common knowledge that the High Priest in ancient Israel possessed Urim and Thummim, and by means of them received divine communications. I am not unmindful of the fact that a diversity of opinion obtains respecting Urim and Thummim of the scriptures, of what they consisted, and the exact use of them, but this I think may be set down as ascertained fact; they were placed in the breast-plate of the High Priest, and were a means through which God communicated to him divine knowledge—the divine will.\*

---

\* The reader will find the above data concerning Urim and Thummim in the following passages: Exodus xxviii: 29, 30; Leviticus viii: 8; Numbers xxvii: 21; Deuteronomy xxxiii: 8; I Samuel xxviii: 6; Ezra ii: 63; Nehemiah vii: 65. He will also find an excellent article on the subject in Smith's Dictionary of the Bible, (Hackett edition) vol. 4, pp. 3356-3363; also in Kitto's Encyclopedia of Biblical Literature, vol. 2, pp. 900-903. Josephus' description of Urim and Thummim is as follows: "I will now treat of what I before omitted, the garment of the high priest: for he (Moses) left no room for the evil practices of (false) prophets; but if some of that sort should attempt to abuse the divine authority, he left it to God to be present at his sacrifices when he pleased, and when he pleased to be absent. And he was willing this should be known, not to the Hebrews only, but to those foreigners also who were there. But as to these stones, which we told you before the high priest bore on his shoulders, which were sardonyxs, (and I think it needless to describe their nature, they being known to everybody): the one of them shined out when God was present at their sacrifices; I mean that which was in the nature of a button on his right shoulder, bright rays darting out thence; and being seen even by those that were most remote; which splendor yet was not before natural to the stone. This has appeared a wonderful thing to such as have not so far indulged themselves in philosophy, as to despise divine revelation. Yet will I mention what is still more wonderful than this: for God declared beforehand, by those twelve stones which the high priest bore on his breast, and which were inserted into his breastplate, when they should be victorious in battle; for so great a splendor shone forth from them before the army began to march, that all the people were sensible of God's being present for their assistance. Whence it came to pass that those Greeks

Since this kind of means, then, was used by prophets in ancient Israel, it should not be matter of astonishment, much less of ridicule, or a thing to be regarded as improbable that when a colony of Israelites were lead away from the main body of the people, a similar *media* for obtaining the will of the Lord, and for translating records not otherwise translatable, should be found with them. So also respecting Joseph Smith's claim to having found what he called a "Seer Stone," by means of which he could translate. That cannot be regarded as an impossibility or even an improbability by those who believe the Bible; for, in addition to the Hebrew literature giving an account of Urim and Thummim in the breastplate of the high priest, it is well known that other means were used by inspired men of Israel for obtaining the word of the Lord. That most excellent of Bible characters, Joseph, the son of Jacob, blessed in his boyhood with prophetic dreams, and possessed of the divine gift of interpreting dreams, the savior of Israel in times of famine, and a wise ruler for a time of Egypt's destiny, used such *media*. When the cup was found in the mouth of Benjamin's sack, Joseph's steward said to him: "Is not this it in which my Lord drinketh, and whereby, indeed, he *divineth*?" Joseph himself said, when his perplexed brethren stood before him, "What deed is this that ye have done? Wot ye not that such a man as I can certainly divine?"\* The fact of ascertaining the word of the Lord by means of this "divining cup" cannot be explained away by suggesting that Joseph merely referred to an Egyptian custom of divining; or that the steward repeated the words which Joseph had spoken to him merely in jest.† As remarked by a learned writer on this subject—"We need not think of Joseph, the pure, the heaven-taught, the blameless one, as adopting, still less as basely pretending to adopt, the dark arts of a system of imposture."‡ I

who had veneration for our laws, because they could not possibly contradict this, called that breastplate *The Oracle*. Now this breastplate and this sardonyx left off shining two hundred years before I composed this book, God having been displeased at the transgression of his laws (Antiquities of the Jews, bk. III, ch. viii.)

\* Genesis xlv: 5-15. † Such is the Roman Catholic explanation of the matter, see note on the passage, Gen. xlv: 5-15, in Douay Bible.  
‡ Smith's Dictionary of the Bible, Art. Urim and Thummim.

agree with that view. It is a reality sustained by Bible authority that there exists *media* through which divine revelation may be obtained, and hence to the Bible believers the claim of Joseph Smith concerning "Urim and Thummim," and the "Seer Stone," by means of which, through the inspiration of God, he translated the record of the Nephites, is not impossible nor even improbable.

But what shall we say to that very large number of people who do not believe the Bible? How shall we so appeal to them as to secure their attention in these matters? Addressing himself to those who questioned at least the likelihood of the resurrection, Paul asked: "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?" So say I respecting those who do not believe in the Bible, but pride themselves on accepting and believing all those things established by the researches of men—by science—why should it be thought a thing incredible with them that angels should visit our earth in order to communicate knowledge not otherwise, perhaps, obtainable. Or why should it be thought a thing incredible with them that *media* should exist through the aid of which inspired men may be assisted in translating records not otherwise translatable. They live in the midst of ascertained facts respecting the universe, that such a thing as communication between the inhabited worlds of that universe ought to be looked upon as a thing so rational that to doubt its probability would be esteemed as folly. They live in the midst of such achievements of man's ingenuity, and in the daily use of such marvelous instruments invented by men for the ascertainment of truth, that surely they ought not to stumble at accepting at least as possible, and even as probable, the existence of *media* possessed of the qualities ascribed by Joseph to the transparent stones he found with the Nephite plates,—Urim and Thummim—and the "Seer Stone," which he sometimes used in translating.

A word as to the first proposition—viz., men live in the midst of ascertained facts respecting the universe that such a thing as communication between inhabited worlds ought to be regarded as a reasonable probability. Of the change of view respecting our own earth and its relations in the universe, I have already spoken.\* Indeed, I may say that with some attention to details I

---

\* New Witnesses. vol. I, chs. xxviii, xxix, xxx.

have considered the transition from the conception of the earth as the centre of the universe, with the sun, and moon and all the stars brought into existence for its convenience, or beauty, or glory, to the conception of the earth as one of the smaller planets of a group moving regularly about the sun as their centre, and the probability of each fixed star being the centre of such a group of planets. The ascertained existence of millions of other suns than ours, evidently the centres of planetary systems being granted, the view that these planets are the habitation of sentient beings seems a concomitant fact, so probable that one is astonished, if not a little provoked, at that conservatism which hesitates to accept a hypothesis so reasonable in itself, and so well sustained by the analogy of the existence of sentient beings on our own planet. The astronomers tell us some of these fixed stars—these suns that are probably the centre of planetary systems—have existed for hundreds of thousands of years, for so distant are they from us in space that it would require that period of time for their light to reach our earth, hence they must have existed all that time. It is evident, then, that they are many times older than our earth; so, too, are the planets that encircle them. From this conclusion to the one that the sentient beings that doubtless dwell upon these planets are far in advance of the inhabitants of our earth, intellectually, morally, spiritually and in everything that makes for higher development and more perfect civilization, is but a little step, which rests on strong probability. From these conclusions, again, to the conceived likelihood of the presiding intelligence of some of these worlds to which our earth may sustain peculiar relations of order or affinity—having both the power and the inclination to communicate from time to time by personal messengers, or other means, to chosen men of our own race,—but for the benefit or good of all,—is but another step, not so large as the others, by which we have been led to this point, and one that rests also upon a base of strong probability. And this is the phenomena of the visitation of angels and revelation testified of in the scriptures. Such phenomena are mistakenly considered supernatural and uncanny. They are not so really. They are very matter of fact realities; perfectly natural, and in harmony with the intellectual order or economy of a universe where intelligence and goodness govern, and love unites



the brotherhood of the universe in bonds of sympathetic interest.

In view of these reflections, why, I ask, should it be thought a thing incredible with scientific men that there should be such phenomena as the visitation of angels, or other means of communication, among the many planets and planetary systems which make up the universe? Surely it will not be argued that it is impossible for sentient beings to pass from world to world, because man in his present state is bound to earth by the force of gravitation, and that the same force would doubtless operate upon the inhabitants of other worlds, and bind them to their local habitation as we are bound to ours. The beings whom we call angels, though of the same race and nature with ourselves, may pass, and doubtless have passed, through such physical changes as to render them quite independent of the clogging force called gravitation. We may not, therefore, place the same limitations upon their powers in this kind as upon man, in his present physical state.

As for other means of communications from intelligences of other worlds to our own, they will not be regarded as impossible in the presence of the achievements of men in such matters. By means of magnetic telegraph systems, man has established instant communication with all parts of the world. Not the highest mountain ranges, not deserts, not even ocean's wide expanse, have been sufficient to bar his way. He has made the earth a net-work of his cables and telegraph lines, until nearly every part of the earth is within the radius of instant communication. In 1896, the National Electric Light Association celebrated the triumphs of electricity by holding a national electrical exposition in New York City. The occasion was the completion of the electric works at Niagara Falls. For ages, that mighty cataract had thundered out the evidences of its mighty power to heedless savages and frontiersmen; but modern man looked upon it, and by the expenditure of five million dollars, harnessed it, applied its forces to his contrivances, made it generate electric force which lights the cities, drives the street cars, and turns the wheels of industry for many miles around; and even transmitted its force to New York City, four hundred and sixty miles distant. It was on that occasion that Governor Levi P. Morton, upon the declaration being made that the exposition was

open, turned a golden key by which four cannon were instantaneously fired in the four quarters of the republic, one in Augusta, Maine, one in San Francisco, one in front of the public building at St. Paul, and another in the public park in New Orleans. This discharge was accomplished by a current of electricity generated at Niagara, and transmitted over the lines of the Postal Telegraph Cable Company. Later in the course of the exposition, a message was sent all over the world, and returned to New York within fifty minutes. The message was:

God created nature's treasures; science utilizes electric power for the grandeur of the nations and peace of the world.

The reply, also sent over the world, was:

Mighty Niagara, nature's wonder, serving men through the world's electric circuit, proclaims to all people science triumphant and the beneficent Creator.

The distance traversed by each of these messages was about twenty-seven thousand five hundred miles, touching nearly all the great centres of population in the world, and that within the almost incredible time of fifty minutes!

Again, in 1898, on the occasion of California's Golden Jubilee, that is, her semi-centennial celebration of the discovery of gold in the state, William McKinley, then president of the United States, seated in his office at the White House, in Washington, D. C., pressed an electric button which rung a bell in the Mechanic's Pavilion in San Francisco, and formally opened the mining exposition, though the president was distant about three thousand miles. The press dispatches, at the time of the event, gave the following graphic description of the event just related:

By an electric sensation, as indescribable as the thrill of the discoverer's cry of "gold," the president of the nation sent from Washington the signal which announced the opening of the fair. As the bell clanged its clear note, and the Great West was for an instant connected with the distant East, a hush fell on the gathered thousands; then, moved by a common impulse, the vast throng burst into cheers. Close following on the touch which sounded the sweet-toned bell came the greeting of President McKinley, announcing "the marking of a mighty epoch in the history of California." About him, over three thousand

miles away, stood the representatives of the state in Congress, their thoughts flying quicker even than telegraphic message to the people gathered in the great pavilion. And so, united by the material ties of the electric wire, and the subtle powers of thought, the East and the West were held for a few brief moments by a community of good wishes.

Wonderful as all this is, it is now eclipsed by wireless telegraphy—now passed beyond its experimental stages, and rapidly coming into the practical commerce of the nations. Man is no longer dependent upon a network of wires and cables for means of communication. The atmosphere enveloping the world affords sufficient means for conducting vibrations made intelligible by the instrument of man's invention; and today, even across the surface of the broad Atlantic, messages are transmitted by this means as easily as by means of the cable lines. So delicate and perfect are the receiving instruments, that from the roar of our great cities' traffic, the message is picked out of the confusion and faithfully registered.

The argument based on all these facts, of course, is this: If man with his limited intelligence, and his limited experience, has contrived means by which he stands in instant communication with all parts of the world, why should it be thought a thing incredible that God, from the midst of his glory, from the heart of the universe, may be within instant means of communication with all parts of his creations. Especially since it is quite generally conceded, by scientists, that all the fixed stars and all the planetary systems encircling them, float in and are connected by the ether, a substance more subtle and sensitive to vibrations than the atmosphere which surrounds our planet, and suggests the *media* of communication. To all this, however, I fancy that I hear the reply of the men of science: "We do not deny the possibility or even the probability of communication from superior intelligences of other planets, we simply say that up to the present time there is no convincing testimony that such communications have been received." This, however, is a miserable begging of the whole question; and an unwarranted repudiation of the testimony of those who have borne witness to the verity of such communications. The testimony of Moses and the prophets, of Jesus and the Apostles, and of Joseph Smith and his associates, may not thus be put out of the reckon-

ing. The character of these witnesses, their service to mankind, what they suffered and sacrificed for their testimonies, make them worthy of belief; and, since in the nature of things in the universe, there is nothing which makes their testimony improbable, but, on the contrary, much that makes it very probable, it is not beneath the dignity of scientists to accord to their statements a patient investigation.

(TO BE CONCLUDED.)

---

#### THE FLOOD-TIME OF ENERGY.

How prodigal most young people are of their physical and mental forces! How little they appreciate their value! On every hand we see young men and women squandering their vital energy, as if a perpetual supply were insured,—as if the fountain of youth would never run dry. They fling away their force as wastefully as the waters of a spring flood overflow into the surrounding country. But, when the flood-tide of youth is past,—when they begin to feel the dryness of age,—they realize the preciousness of what they squandered so recklessly. In some places where the water supply is abundant in spring, the streams dry up completely in summer. The only possible way of securing power to work the mills in such places is to store the water of the spring floods by means of dams. Even so the great floods of mental and physical force come to us in the spring of youth. The drain upon them begins in middle or later life. If men had a higher regard for their energy, there would be less occasion for the report that when they reach middle life employers cannot use them.—*Selected.*