



Type: Magazine Article

Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 14, No. 8 (June 1911)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 665-677

Abstract: This article produces a Mormon view of the historical-critical method of biblical source analysis. “The methods . . . 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.” The author deals with the literary critics by delivering logic against logic, but also establishes the spiritual nature of the Book of Mormon. The first part covers chronology and 1 Nephi.

IMPROVEMENT ERA.

VOL. XIV.

JUNE, 1911.

No. 8

Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon.*

BY ELDER BRIGHAM H. ROBERTS.

The Cache stake superintendent of Y. M. M. I. A. announced to the audience of two thousand persons that Elder Roberts' subject would be "Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon."

ELDER ROBERTS: I am very glad that the general superintendent of Improvement work in this stake of Zion has announced the subject of my remarks, because it enables me to say to you that the questions we are to consider in regard to higher criticism will be no attempt at anything like a thorough exposition of that subject; but the consideration of higher criticism in its relations to the Book of Mormon on a very few points. The methods and results growing out of higher criticism constitute too large a theme to be disposed of at one sitting; and so I would have you approach the subject this evening with the understanding that there is no attempt on my part to consider the whole theme, but just a few things in relation to it, and I sincerely trust that those present who are familiar with that system of criticism, and who

* A discourse delivered in the tabernacle, Logan, Utah, Sunday evening, April 2, 1911. Reported by F. E. Barker for the IMPROVEMENT ERA.

are in sympathy with its results, if I fail to recognize all that may be good in it, that they will attribute that fact to the limits to which our discussion is to be confined.

I shall take a text from the Book of Mormon, from a certain vision the First Nephi had of future events. His vision illustrates, perhaps as no other prophet illustrates, that very happy expression of one of the early elders and apostles of the Church, Elder Parley P. Pratt, who, you will remember, in the title to one of the chapters of that little "Mormon" classic, *The Voice of Warning*, propounds this question: "What is prophecy but history reversed?" That is, prophecy regarded as a foreseeing of things that will be, before they happen in human experience. To this prophet Nephi was given the privilege of seeing, in rather full outline, the life of the Christ, the establishment of his Church in the meridian dispensation, and many things that were to happen in the course of the ages yet to be. Of course, I know you higher critics are already smiling at such a statement as that. But, nevertheless, such is the representation of the Book of Mormon with reference to this remarkable vision of Nephi's. Among other things, he foresaw the peopling of this Western hemisphere by the Gentile races, and at this point I read my text:

And it came to pass that I beheld the remnant of the seed of my brethren, and also the Book of the Lamb of God, which had proceeded from the mouth of the Jew, that it came forth from the Gentiles unto the remnant of the seed of my brethren [our American Indians]. And after it had come forth unto them, I beheld other books which came forth by the power of the Lamb, from the Gentiles unto them, unto the convincing of the Gentiles and remnant of the seed of my brethren, and also the Jews, who were scattered upon all the face of the earth, that the records of the prophets [having in mind the Old Testament] and of the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb [having in mind the New Testament] are true. And the angel spake unto me, saying, These last records which thou hast seen among the Gentiles shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them; and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world, and that all men must come unto him or they cannot be saved" (I Nephi 13).

Such is the proclaimed mission of the Book of Mormon—to establish the truth of the Jewish scriptures, the Old Testament and the New; and, secondly, to convince both Gentiles and Jews that Jesus is the Christ; that the only means of salvation for man is the gospel of Christ, which is the “power of God unto salvation” to every man that believes it and obeys it. That is the mission of the Book of Mormon.

I now come to certain objections to this book, based on the conclusions of higher criticism. A very estimable gentleman of your city has done me the honor to refer to some remarks of mine, in relation to what the Book of Mormon must submit to, in the way of testing its truth. I will quote his words:

In a recent book, Mr. Brigham H. Roberts has said that “the fact should be recognized by the Latter-day Saints that the Book of Mormon of necessity must submit to every test, to literary criticism as well as to every other class of criticism.” The contention is a reasonable one, and in response to the invitation that it presents, the following pages will consider the book of Mormon in the light which the modern study of the Bible throws upon it.

I am willing to repeat my statement 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 archæological research and also to the higher criticism. And, what is more, in the midst of it all, its advocates must carry themselves in a spirit of patience and of courage; and that they will do just as long, of course, as their faith remains true to the book. For many years, after a rather rigid analysis, as I think, of the evidence bearing upon the truth of the Book of Mormon, I have reached, through some stress and struggle, too, an absolute conviction of its truth. The book is flung down into the world’s mass of literature, and here it is; we proclaim it true, and the world has the right to test it to the uttermost in every possible way. Since we admit this, let us consider the effect of higher criticism upon the book, or of certain results of higher criticism upon it, as viewed by those who do not believe in its divine authenticity.

Perhaps I had better say just a few words here, in a general way, about higher criticism. I have here a definition which I

regard as extremely fair, and as comprehensive as a brief definition can be. I quote the words of Dr. Elliott, author of *The Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch*. First, however, let me say that which is called the "Literary Method," is identical with what is called "Higher Criticism," the terms are often used interchangeably. Higher Criticism may be said to stand in contradistinction to what is called Lower Criticism in this, that it concerns itself with writings as a whole, whereas Lower Criticism concerns itself with the integrity or character of particular passages or texts, and is sometimes called "Textual Criticism." And now Dr. Elliott:

The term Literary or Higher Criticism designates that type of Biblical criticism which proposes to investigate the separate books of the Bible in their internal peculiarities, and to estimate them historically. It discusses the questions concerning their origin, the time and place, the occasion and object of their composition, and concerning their position and value in the entire body of revelation. . . . The Higher Criticism has been so often employed for the overthrow of long-cherished beliefs, that the epithet "destructive" has frequently been applied to it; and hence it has become an offense to some orthodox ears.—*Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch*, by Charles Elliott, D. D.

You recognize, do you not, that the methods of higher criticism are legitimate; that is to say, it is right to consider the various books of the scriptures, the Old Testament and the New, as a body of literature, and to examine them internally, and go into the circumstances under which they were written, and the time at which they were written, and the purpose for which they were written? All that we recognize as legitimate, though I must say, in passing, that when one enters into the details of these methods, it is rather astonishing, at least it is to me, to see what 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.

Allow me to briefly set forth at this time a summary of the conclusions of the higher critics in relation to the Old Testament, and, further along in my remarks, I will take up some of the con-

clusions formed in relation to the New Testament. But in reference to the library of books known to us as the Old Testament, Dr. Lyman Abbott, one high in authority among higher critics, sets forth the following conclusions as practically agreed upon:

They are generally agreed in thinking that the Book of Genesis is composed of three or four or more documents woven together by some ancient editor in one continuous narrative. They are generally agreed in thinking that the book of "the Covenant," with the Ten Commandments at its forefront, is the oldest book in the Bible; that the history in which that book of the Covenant is imbedded was written *long subsequent to the time of Moses*. They are generally agreed in thinking that the book of Deuteronomy, embodying a later prophet's conception of Mosaic principles, was not written or uttered by Moses himself in its present form, but some centuries after the death of Moses. They are generally agreed in thinking that the book of Leviticus was written long subsequent to the time of Moses; and so far from embodying the principles of the Mosaic code, embodies much that is in spirit adverse, if not antagonistic, to the simple principles of Mosaism. They are generally agreed in considering that we have in the books of Kings and Chronicles history and *belles lettres* so woven together that it is not always possible to tell what is to be regarded as *belles lettres* and what is to be regarded as history. They are generally agreed in the opinion that Job, while it treats of history about the days of Moses, or even anterior thereto, was written later than the time of Solomon; that very little of the Hebrew ~~Psalter~~ was composed by David: the most of it was composed in the time of the exile or subsequent thereto; . . . that the Book of Isaiah was written by certainly two authors and perhaps more, the latter book being written one hundred years at least after the earlier, and by a prophet now unknown.

Such, in brief, is a statement of the conclusions of higher criticism in relation to the Old Testament as far along at least as Isaiah. Now merely to indicate in what way our Book of Mormon may possibly become a witness for the integrity of the scriptures, I call attention to the following incident in the history of Lehi's colony:

After Lehi's colony had left Jerusalem, and was encamped in the wilderness, Lehi desired very much to carry with him upon that unknown journey upon which he was starting—at least unknown as to its destination, except perhaps in some general way—he desired to carry with him, I say, the genealogy of his

fathers and the Jewish scriptures; that this desire might be realized, his sons returned to Jerusalem, and, after some adventures, succeeded at last in obtaining a volume of the scriptures, together with the genealogy of their father, and with these records returned to the wilderness. This is supposed to be some six hundred years before Christ. When these books were brought to Lehi, he discovered that they contained the five books of Moses, together with other writings down to the day of Jeremiah, the prophet, including some of the writings of Jeremiah. I quote the passage:

And after they [Lehi's colony] had given thanks unto the God of Israel, my father, Lehi, took the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, and he did search them from the beginning, and he beheld that they did contain the five books of Moses, which gave an account of the creation of the world, and also of Adam and Eve, who were our first parents; and also a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah; and also the prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah.

Now, on the theory that the Book of Mormon is what it purports to be—a true history of events which happened in the experience of this man Lehi and his descendants—you have here a testimony dating back six hundred years before Christ, for the integrity of the books of Moses, their authorship and their number; and also a testimony for the integrity of most of the Old Testament as we have it today; and in this way the Book of Mormon becomes a witness for the truth of the Jewish scriptures.

But now to come to matters with which we are to be more immediately concerned. It is pointed out in this brochure, from which I am going to read, that there are certain results accepted by the so-called higher criticism, which discredit the Book of Mormon, which disprove its truth in plain terms, to those who publish it. Let me here observe that the gentleman who wrote this pamphlet, the Rev. Paul Jones of your city, has been very considerate in the use of phraseology, seeking to avoid offense, and is really modest in the claims that he makes for the argument that he employs. The first error he discovers, as to the Book of Mormon, is one of chronology. He says:

The chronology of the Book of Mormon is quite at fault, when com-

pared with the dates now accepted by Biblical scholars. The Book of Mormon places the departure of Lehi from Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah. The years that follow are carefully counted from that date. [Then citations from the Book of Mormon are given]. Now, scholars are agreed that the first year of Zedekiah was in 595-596 B. C., and counting six hundred years from that time would date the birth of Christ in the year 4-5 A. D. But the date best attested for the birth of Christ [*i. e.*, by the higher criticism] is 6 B. C. Also the thirty-fourth year from the giving of the sign, according to the Book of Mormon, would place the crucifixion in the year 38-39 A. D., but there is almost universal agreement among modern scholars that it took place in 29 A. D. It should be noted, too, [and I pray you mark it] that the Book of Mormon misdates the birth and crucifixion of Christ, in spite of the fact that those two points of termination were supposed to be marked by such unusual signs as the three days' continuous light [at the time of Messiah's birth] and the three days' continuous darkness in the western hemisphere [at the time of Messiah's death]. "*The Bible and the Book of Mormon, Some Suggestive Points from Modern Bible Study*," by Rev. Paul Jones, Logan, Utah, pp. 4-6.)

Now, in presenting my argument upon this objection, it will not be necessary for me to dispute or attempt to overthrow the conclusions of the higher criticism. I shall go no further in my argument than to call your attention to the fact 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. To begin with, some years ago, I gave attention to this matter, and crystalized the results of some of the late research in the following statements:

The birth of Christ was first made an era from which to reckon dates by Dionysius Exiguus, in the early part of the sixth century A. D. He supposed Christ to have been born on the 25th of December, in the year of Rome 753, and this computation has been followed in practice to this day; notwithstanding the learned are well agreed that it must be incorrect. . . . It is clear from Matt. 2: 1, etc., that Christ was born before the death of Herod the Great, who died about Easter, in the year of Rome 749 or 750. Now, if Christ was born in December next before Herod's death, it must have been in the year of Rome 748 or 7

and, of course, four, if not five, years anterior to the Dionysian or Vulgar era.

That is the first proposition; the second follows:

It is probable, from Luke 3: 1, 2, 23, that Jesus was about thirty years of age in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Now, the reign of Tiberius may be considered as commencing at the time he became sole emperor, in August of the year of Rome 767; or (as there is some reason to suppose that Augustus made him partner in the government two years before he died) we may begin his reign in the year of Rome 765. The fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius will, therefore, be either the year of Rome 781 or 779. From which deduct thirty, and we have the year of Rome 751 or 749 for the year of Christ's birth, the former two and the latter four years earlier than the Dionysian computation. Comparing these results with those obtained from the death of Herod, it is generally supposed the true time of Christ's birth was the year of Rome 749, or four years before the Vulgar era. *But the conclusion is not certain, because there is uncertainty about the data* (*Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, Sec. 1).

To the foregoing, I add the following statement of Rev. Charles F. Deem, author of *The Light of the Nation*, and president of the American Institute of Christian Philosophy. He says:

“It is annoying to see learned men use the same apparatus of calculation and reach the most diverse results.” On page 32 of the work mentioned, Dr. Deem, in a foot note, refers to fifteen different authors, all of whom are writers of note, who give different years for the birth of Christ, varying from B. C. 1 to B. C. 7 (*Ibid*).

I call your attention to these facts merely to show the uncertainty of the deductions from chronological data; and I have here in my hand a work under the title of *Orpheus, a History of Religions*, by Reinach, a book published in 1909, and a work of high standing in the historical field—the religious historical field. In his chapters that deal with Christianity he accepts the conclusions of higher critics, and on this question of the birth and death of the Christ, he has the following remarkable passage, which I commend to your serious attention:

Do we know anything definite as to the date of Christ's birth and activity? Matthew places his birth in the reign of Herod, that is to

say, at the latest in the year 4 B. C.; Luke dates it at the time of a census which took place ten years after, in the year 6 A. D., [the date favored in the brochure with which we are dealing, you will remember]. The same Luke says Jesus was thirty in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the year 29 of our era, the date to which he assigns the baptism of Jesus by St. John; but Luke seems to have taken this date from the passage in Josephus (which speaks of the death of John the Baptist in connection with an event of the year 36) and to have allowed for an interval of seven years between the preaching of John the Baptist and the incident in question. Luke makes the ministry of Jesus last only a year and a half, whereas, John declares that it lasted three and a half years. Luke recounts an episode in the childhood of Jesus, whereas the other evangelists seem to have known nothing of this period of his life. John makes the Jews say to Jesus, "Thou art not yet fifty years old," from which the early church inferred that he was about forty-nine at his death; but in this case, if he was born in the year 4 B. C., he must have died in A. D. 45, not under Tiberius, but under Claudius, and, indeed, the forged report of Pilate fabricated by the Christians is addressed to Claudius. If, on the other hand, Jesus was born in the year of the census (the year 6 A. D.) and lived forty-nine years, he died in 55, and this opinion was stoutly upheld by certain Christians of Jerusalem. Finally, Eusebius mentions another false report ascribed to Pilate, according to which Jesus was crucified in A. D. 21, which, remarks Eusebius, is impossible, as we know from Josephus that Pilate was not procurator at this period. Thus we see that even the fact of the condemnation under Pilate is not established. That Pilate appears escorted by Annas and Caiaphas in Luke's gospel proves only one thing, namely that Luke had read Josephus, or one of his authorities. *To sum up, we find that less than a century after the Christian era, which tradition places four years after the birth of Jesus, no one knew precisely when he was born, when he taught or when he died.*

And this author, from whom I have just quoted, is influenced in his conclusions by higher criticism, and accepts—as far as one can accept such a diversity of conclusions—he accepts higher criticism's conclusions. And I say, in closing this point, that until the science of chronology can yield a greater degree of certainty than it exhibits in the dates connected with the life of the Christ, we have no occasion to be alarmed at the chronology of the Book of Mormon, because it disagrees with the conclusions of higher criticism.

There is just one more item upon this point, and then I leave it, and that is this: I called your attention, in passing, to a statement made by Rev. Paul Jones, that the Book of Mormon misdates the birth and crucifixion of Christ, in spite of the fact that these two points of termination were supposed to be marked by such unusual scenes as the three days' continuous light, as the sign of his birth, and the three days' continuous darkness, as the sign of Messiah's death. Now, upon that point our friend has not read with sufficient care what the Book of Mormon has said in relation to the time of the death of Christ. Listen. I read from Third Nephi, the opening verse of the 8th chapter. This is in regard to the date of Messiah's death:

And now it came to pass that according to our record, and we know our record to be true, for, behold, it was a just man who kept the record.

I take it that that has reference to the record in a general way—they knew the record to be true. Now mark you:

And it came to pass that, according to our record, *that if there was no mistake made by this man in the reckoning of our time*, the thirty-third year passed away; and it came to pass in the thirty-fourth year, in the first month, in the fourth day of the month, there arose a great storm, such an one as was never known before, etc.

So you note this remarkable circumstance, that there seems to be a possibility, at least, of the man who kept this record not being absolutely accurate. The statement that the beginning of the thirty-fourth year as marking the death of Christ, is contingent upon the accuracy of him who kept that record. Will some one say, "Yes, that discloses the cunning of the work. Joseph Smith put in this proviso just to escape being cornered?" But wait a moment, that point was not raised, nor was there any question as to the accuracy of the commonly accepted date of Christ's birth at the place where, and at the time when the Book of Mormon was translated. Higher criticism was not under way in those days, so that it cannot be said that this proviso of accuracy was an anchor thrown haphazard to provide against possible future question of accuracy of the date of Messiah's birth. Our Book of Mormon statement, then, is: If he who kept the record

made no mistake, then it was thirty-four years from the time when the sign of Messiah's birth was given, to the sign of his crucifixion; but he who kept the record may or may not have been absolutely accurate; we have no means of determining that point.

The second disagreement between the conclusions of higher criticism and the Book of Mormon is of a weightier and more worthy character. It is stated in these words:

Another point which the modern study of the Bible has established that undermines the validity of the Book of Mormon is in regard to the date of the composition of certain chapters of Isaiah. The Book of Mormon quotes in various places chapters 48-54 of Isaiah as being among the writings carried away from Jerusalem in the first year of Zedekiah, 597-6 B. C.; but the best authorities among scholars today are agreed that these chapters were not written until at least the period of exile in Babylon, say fifty years later, and hence could not have been carried away by Lehi (page 6).

Now, here is a real difficulty. Let me go over the ground again. It is insisted that there are two Isaiahs instead of one. Some Isaian critics, by the way, think they can trace seven authors—seven different authors in Isaiah. But generally it is represented that there are at least two, and perhaps more—but two, at least; that the first Isaiah was the prophet himself, that splendid figure who gave religious advice, instruction and prophetic direction through four reigns of the kings of Judah, and is one of the grandest figures in Hebrew history. That is the author of the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah; but from chapter forty to chapter sixty-six, is written by other authors, and, as stated here in the passage read from the brochure being examined, in the Book of Mormon you find whole chapters quoted from this second Isaiah. And now, if the contention of our higher critics be true, that this portion of Isaiah was not written until some fifty years, at least, after Lehi left Jerusalem, then, of course, he could not carry this portion of Isaiah with him into the wilderness; and, consequently, Nephi could not transcribe chapters into the record he made; and, consequently, they could not be in the Nephite scriptures for Joseph Smith to translate into our English version of the Book of Mormon. That must be patent to all. You will observe that here we have a question that challenges the integrity of the

Book of Mormon, its translator—a real difficulty. What are we to say in reply to it?

In justice to this question, I think I ought to read to you a statement of the argument that is made in Dr. Driver's *Introduction to the Old Testament Literature*, in support of this theory of there being two Isaiahs, or two authors of the book that bears the title, "The Book of the Prophet Isaiah."

The internal evidence [that is, the internal evidence for the conclusions of the higher critics] supplied by the prophecy itself, points to this period [that is, to the time of the captivity, as the time of the composition, the time of writing the second Isaiah, one hundred and fifty years after the death of the first Isaiah, and at least fifty years after the departure of Lehi from Jerusalem] as that at which it was written. It alludes repeatedly to Jerusalem as ruined and deserted; to the sufferings which the Jews have experienced, or are experiencing, at the hands of the Chaldeans; the prospect of return, which, as the prophet speaks, is imminent. Those whom the prophet addresses, and, moreover, addresses in person—arguing with them, appealing to them, striving to win their assent by his warm and impassioned rhetoric—are not the men of Jerusalem, contemporaries of Ahaz and Hezekiah, or even of Manassah, they are the exiles in Babylonia. Judged by the analogy of prophecy, this constitutes the strongest possible presumption that the author actually lived in the period which he thus describes, and is not merely (as has been supposed) Isaiah immersed in spirit in the future, as holding converse, as it were, with the generations yet unborn. Such an immersion in the future would be not only without parallel in the Old Testament, it would be contrary to the nature of prophecy. The Prophet speaks always in the first instance, to his own contemporaries; the message which he brings intimately related with the circumstances of his time; his promises and predictions, however far they reach into the future, nevertheless rest upon the basis of the history of his own age, and correspond to the needs which are then felt. The prophet never abandons his own historical position, but speaks from it.

Second. The argument derived from the historic function of prophecy is confirmed by the literary style of chapters 40-66, which is very different from that of Isaiah 1-39. Isaiah 1-39 shows strongly marked individualities of style. He is fond of particular images and phrases, many of which are used by no other writer of the Old Testament. Now in the chapters which contain evident allusions to the age of Isaiah himself these expressions occur repeatedly; in the chapters which are without

such allusions, and which thus authorize *prima facie* the inference that they belong to a different age, they are absent, and new images and phrases appear instead. The coincidence cannot be accidental. The subject of chapters 40-66 is not so different from that of Isaiah's prophecies, *e. g.*, against the Assyrians, as to necessitate a new phraseology and rhetorical form. The differences can only be explained by the supposition of a change of author.

Third. The theological ideas of chapters 40 to 66 (insofar as they are not of that fundamental kind common to the prophets generally) differ remarkably from those which appear from chapters 1 to 39, to be distinctive of Isaiah. Thus, on the nature of God generally, the ideas expressed are much larger and fuller. Isaiah, for instance, depicts the majesty of Jehovah: in chapters 40 to 46 the prophet emphasizes his infinitude; he is the Creator, the Sustainer of the Universe, the Lawgiver, the Author of History, the First and the Last, the Incomparable One. This is a real difference. And yet it cannot be argued that opportunities for such assertions of Jehovah's power and Godhead would not have presented themselves naturally to Isaiah whilst he was engaged in defying the armies of Assyria. But, in truth, chapters 40 to 46 show an advance upon Isaiah, not only in the substance of their theology, but also in the form in which it is presented; truths which are merely reaffirmed in Isaiah, being here made the subject of reflection and argument.

Such are the headlines, as we may say, the brief statements of the reasons given—and they are the strongest reasons given—why we are to regard the chapters from forty to sixty-six in Isaiah as written by a different person from the one who wrote the first thirty-nine chapters; and as they stand here presented I must confess that they look formidable. But if you will take Dr. Driver's work, and will 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.

[TO BE CONCLUDED IN THE JULY NUMBER OF THE ERA.]

“A MAN must be one of two things; either a reed shaken by the wind, or a wind to shake the reeds.”—HANFORD.