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Some Objections to the Book of Mormon Answered

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SOME OBJECTIONS TO THE BOOK OF MORMON ANSWERED:

BY H. B. ROBERTS.

Elder J. A. Glazier, writing from Auckland, New Zealand, under date of December 20, 1901, says:

A gentleman of this city has been studying the Book of Mormon, and has brought up some passages which evidently do not agree with the known facts. Any light on these passages which will enable me to make them harmonize with the Bible will be appreciated.

First, Alma 7: 10, says, Jesus would be born at Jerusalem.

Second, in Helaman 14: 20-27, and in I Nephi 19: 10, we read about three days of darkness which should cover "all the earth" and the isles of the sea at the crucifixion of the Savior. Neither the Bible nor history speaks of three days of darkness on the eastern hemisphere. Hence, it did not cover "all the earth," as we understand it.

Third, Outlines of Ecclesiastical History, by Elder B. H. Roberts, states on page 17, in the notes, that Jesus must have been born April 6. We learn from the Book of Mormon, III Nephi 2: 8, that the Nephites reckoned time from the appearance of the sign of the birth of Jesus; and in III Nephi 8: 5, we find he was crucified thirty-three years and four days after his birth, which would make the date of his crucifixion April 10, instead of April 6, as stated.

The gentleman referred to above is working on one of the daily papers here, and has it within his power to do us harm by publishing these statements from our books, which I do not feel competent to answer in a plain and satisfactory manner. Therefore, I trust it will not inconvenience you to favor me with a reply in the columns of the ERA or by letter.

The letter from which the foregoing excerpts are taken was

handed to me to answer through the ERA, and to that request I cheerfully respond.

I.

In the first place, let me remark in passing, that the gentleman in Auckland who, in studying the Book of Mormon, has come upon these supposed contradictions, has made no new discovery in the way of objections to the Book of Mormon. They are so old and have so often been repeated by objectors to the Book of Mormon, that they have about them a familiarity not unlike the refrain of some old song. These objections have been made almost from the time the Book of Mormon was first published to the world. Take the first item, for instance, about Jesus being born "at Jerusalem." Alexander Campbell, the founder of the sect of the "Disciples," or "Christians," more commonly called "Campbellites," as early as February 10, 1831, before the Book of Mormon had been in print quite one year, made this same objection, only he charged that the Book of Mormon said that Jesus was born "in Jerusalem." And as it is well known that Jesus was born at Bethlehem, a village some four miles south of Jerusalem, there is supposed to be a contradiction between the Book of Mormon and the known facts. As a matter of fact, however, the Book of Mormon neither says that Jesus was born "in Jerusalem" nor "at Jerusalem." What it does say is—and I quote the passage cited in the communication here under consideration, viz., Alma 7: 10—"Behold he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem, *which is the land of our forefathers.*" Not the *city* of our fathers, mark you, but the "*land of our forefathers.*" There can be no question in the world but what the Nephite historian is stating the "land" of Messiah's birth, not the city of his nativity; and that being conceded—as it must be by every fair-minded critic—the supposed contradiction between the Book of Mormon statement and the known facts in the case disappear at once.

This explanation of the supposed difficulty is further strengthened when it is remembered that it was a custom of the Nephites to name large districts of country—such districts as might correspond to provinces and principalities in other nationalities—after the chief city of the land:

And now it was the custom of the people of Nephi to call their lands, and their cities, and their villages, yea, even all their small villages, by the name of him who first possessed them; and thus it was with the land of Ammoniah.—Alma 8: 7.

And hence, too, came the practice of calling large districts of country after the chief city therein; and in this same book of Alma—as throughout the Book of Mormon—we have the city named after the man who founded it, and the district of country named from the chief city, thus: “The land of Zarahemla;” “the land of Melek;” “the land of Ammonihah;” “the land of Gideon;” “the land of Lehi-Nephi, or the city of Lehi-Nephi;” and so on *ad infinitum*. It became a habit of speech with them, especially with reference to Jerusalem, from whence their forefathers came, as witness the following few out of many such quotations that could be given:

I shall give this people a name that they may be distinguished above all the people which the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem.—Mosiah 1: 11.

That same God has brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem.—Mosiah 7: 20.

Why not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem.—Helaman 16: 19.

Hence when it is said that Jesus should be born “at Jerusalem, which is the land of our forefathers,” the Nephite writer merely conformed to a habit of speech, and meant the land of Jerusalem, not the city.

II.

What is said on the objection just considered, will show the importance of carefully examining the language of the Book of Mormon objected to in any case; for it is seldom treated fairly by those who make the exceptions to it. This holds with equal force to the second objection here to be considered. The objection as stated by our correspondent, in brief, and pointedly, is—The Book of Mormon says that at the crucifixion of Messiah there will be three days of darkness that will cover all the face of the earth and the isles of the sea. History and the Bible are silent about such an event;

therefore, the Book of Mormon makes a false statement and must itself be untrue, and, consequently, uninspired, and is not at all what it claims to be—viz., a record of the ancient inhabitants of America, and brought forth by the power of God for the enlightenment and instruction of the world.

This objection, as put by our correspondent, differs a little from the ordinary manner in which it is stated by objectors. They usually try to make it appear that the Book of Mormon's statement that there were three *days* darkness at the crucifixion, is in conflict with the New Testament statement that there were *three hours* darkness only, at that time; but the fact that the New Testament statement refers to an event that took place while Jesus hung upon the cross in Judea, and the Book of Mormon's statement refers to an event that took place after his crucifixion, and in the western hemisphere, it must be apparent that there is no conflict of statements in this regard between the two records.

But now to meet the objection as presented by the gentleman of New Zealand. All that is necessary is to present just exactly what the Book of Mormon does say with reference to the three days of darkness:

The God of our fathers * * * yieldeth himself, according to the words of the angel, as a man into the hands of wicked men to be lifted up according to the words of Zenock, and to be crucified according to the words of Neum, and to be buried in a sepulchre, according to the words of Zenos, which he spake, concerning *the three days of darkness, which should be a sign given of his death, unto those who should inhabit the isles of the sea; more especially given unto those who are of the House of Israel.*—I Nephi 19: 10.

This is one of the passages quoted respecting the three days of darkness; but, mark you, there is nothing here about the three days of darkness extending over the whole face of the earth. It speaks of it as extending to the isles of the sea; to those more especially inhabited by the house of Israel; clearly intimating that it would not extend to all the isles of the sea. In passing, and merely by the way, it may be interesting to call attention to the fact that here are three

Hebrew prophets referred to by Nephi—Zenock, Neum and Zenos—each of whom had recorded an important prophecy respecting the coming and mission of Christ; and had not the Jews eliminated the books of these prophets from their collection of Scripture, it could not then have been said, as it is now said, that the Bible is silent respecting these three days of darkness, which were to be a sign of Messiah's death; for then they would have had the words of Zenos that there was to be such a sign given in the isles of the sea, inhabited by the house of Israel.

Behold, as I said unto you concerning another sign, a sign of his death, behold in that day that he shall suffer death, the sun shall be darkened and refuse to give his light unto you, and also the moon, and the stars; and there shall be *no light upon the face of this land*, even from the time that he shall suffer death, for the space of three days, to the time that he shall rise again from the dead. * * * And behold thus hath the angel * * * said unto me, that these things should be, that *darkness should cover the face of the whole earth for the space of three days*. And the angel said unto me, that many shall see greater things than these, to the intent that they might believe *that these signs and these wonders should come to pass upon all the face of this land*.—Helaman 14: 20-28.

This is the other passage quoted in the communication under consideration; and in it is found the phrase, "*that darkness should cover the face of the whole earth for the space of three days*." But it should be remembered that this is preceded by a statement concerning the three days darkness that limits this otherwise general statement, namely, "*and there shall be no light upon the face of this land*"—meaning America—"for the space of three days." This clearly limits the particular sign under consideration to America and the adjacent islands of the sea, in other words, to the western hemisphere. Moreover, the phrase, "*that darkness should cover the face of the whole earth*," is followed as well as preceded by the limiting clause—"these signs and these wonders"—namely, the three hours of tempest and of earthquake followed by the three days of darkness—"should come to pass upon all the face of this land"—meaning, of course, America.

Then again, when the prophecy is left and you turn to the

history of its fulfillment, the whole of the thrilling narrative is clearly confined to the statement of events that occurred in the lands occupied by the Nephites—that is, to the western hemisphere. Yet in that narrative is found the same form of expression as in the prophecy of Samuel, the Lamanite. While describing events that are clearly confined to Nephite lands, Mormon says: “And thus *the face of the whole earth became deformed* because of the tempests and the thunderings and the lightnings. * * * And behold the rocks were rent in twain; they were broken up *upon all the face of the whole earth.*”—(III Nephi 8: 17, 18.) Now, did the prophet really mean that the convulsions he was describing extended to Europe and Asia and Africa because he said the rocks were “*broken up upon the face of the whole earth*”? No; you limit the general expression here by the facts of the whole circumstance under consideration, so that “broken up upon the face of the whole earth,” means upon the face of the whole earth so far as the Nephite lands are concerned—that is the limitation of the general phrase.

As an example of this kind of interpretation, allow me to introduce a passage or two from the Bible. Daniel, in giving the interpretation of the king of Babylon’s dream, says:

Thou, O king, *art* a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. *And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all.* Thou *art* this head of gold.

Does this prophecy really mean “wheresoever the children of men dwell,” there, too, was the rule and dominion of Nebuchadnezzar? Did he rule all of Europe and Africa! Did his dominion extend to the western hemisphere, for there the children of men dwelt as well as in Asia? It is a matter of common information that Nebuchadnezzar’s dominion was not thus extended, but really was quite limited. What, then? Shall we reject the prophecies of Daniel because a strict and technical construction of his language does not meet the facts?

Again he says, speaking of the political powers that would succeed Babylon:

And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of brass, *which shall bear rule over all the earth.*

This third kingdom is generally agreed to have reference to the kingdom of Alexander; but did Alexander "bear rule over all the earth?" Did he bear rule over the western hemisphere? No; nor did he know of its existence. What, then, shall we do with this inspired prophet who says he "shall bear rule over all the earth?" Shall we reject him and his book? Or say that his statements do not agree with the facts? That were absurd. The particular phrase is limited by the general circumstances under which the prophet was speaking. That is the course taken by all who believe the book of Daniel, and it is a course amply justified by reason.

Again, it is recorded in Luke, speaking of the events which happened during the crucifixion of the Savior:

And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a *darkness over all the earth* until the ninth hour.

Did this inspired writer really have in mind the whole round earth, or was he speaking with reference to what happened right there in Judea where the main event occurred? Undoubtedly he had reference to what had been stated to him by the eye witnesses of the scene, who merely related what appeared to them; namely, that a darkness settled down over the land, but they were not thinking of the face of the whole earth when they told the story to Luke, nor was he when he wrote his statement of the event.

One other example:

Be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was *preached to every creature under heaven*; whereof I Paul am a minister.—Col. 1: 23.

Is this statement of Paul's literally true? Had the gospel at that time, or, for matter of that, has it at any time since then, been preached *unto every creature under heaven*? Certainly not. And when Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians there were millions of the children of men, as there are to this day, who never had heard of Messiah or the gospel. Paul could only have meant by

this over-statement of the matter, that the gospel had been very generally preached in the kingdoms and provinces with which himself and the Colossians were acquainted; and no one thinks of rejecting Paul or his books because of such seeming inaccuracies. His use of such broad-sweeping phrases are interpreted in the light of reason, and limited by the well known circumstances under which he wrote. It should be remembered in this connection, that hyperbole is a habit of speech with oriental peoples, to whom the Jews belonged; and indirectly, too, the Nephites are descendants of the same people, and have retained to a large extent the same habits of expression; all of which should be taken into account in the interpretation of the Nephite records as it always is in exegeses of the Hebrew scriptures.

We do not ask for the Book of Mormon immunity from criticism. We beg no questions in its interests. It is before the world for its inspection; let them analyze it as severely as they choose, and criticize it as thoroughly as they can; we shall only ask that the same canons of good sense and right reason be applied in that criticism as are employed in the criticism of other sacred books.

III.

Relative to the third item of objection, I must be briefer in its treatment. The passage in the "Outlines" referred to is a note on page seventeen, in which it is argued that the data which, in the judgment of the author, best fixes the time of the birth of Messiah is the opening paragraph of Section XX of the Doctrine and Covenants, which says:

The rise of the Church of Christ in these last days, being one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh, it being regularly organized and established agreeable to the laws of our country * * * in the fourth month and on the sixth day of the month which is called April.

The argument on this is that if the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior in the flesh, then the 6th of April must have been the anniversary of the

Savior's birthday. If the organization of the Church had been before or subsequent to that date, if only by one or any number of days, the great event, strictly speaking, would have been more or less than one thousand eight hundred and thirty years. This argument and the statement of fact upon which it is based, is further strengthened by a remark in the "History of the Prophet," but which does not appear in the "Outlines," viz.: In giving an account of a meeting of the Saints who assembled near Independence, Jackson county, Missouri, on the 6th of April, 1833, to celebrate the third anniversary of this organization of the Church, the Prophet says:

The day was spent in a very agreeable manner, in giving and receiving knowledge which appertained to this last kingdom. *It being just 1800 years since the Savior laid down His life that man might have everlasting life, and only three years since the Church had come out of the wilderness, preparatory for the last dispensation.—Millennial Star, vol xiv, p. 388.*

These two passages, if strictly construed, fix exactly the day and year of the Savior's birth and also the day and year of His crucifixion. This is the opinion of the author of the "Outlines;" whether it appeals to others or not is a matter for them to decide for themselves. It has no other authority behind it than the reasonableness of the argument based upon the stated facts. Should it turn out to be untrue, it in no way invalidates the truth of God's great latter-day work; and no Elder is bound by it as doctrine; he is not called upon to defend it as part of the gospel, nor any other statement or argument of that book, or any other book which the writer or any other author has written. Only those books which are held by the Church to be Scripture—the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price—are the Elders bound to defend. These books have been accepted by the Church as containing the word of God, and these books the Elders at home and abroad should maintain as absolutely true. As for the rest, they may be very useful and instructive, but are not of the same dignity as the four books named, and are only acceptable as they agree with our books of

Scripture. This, however, is a digression, and is only said by the way.

Now to return. The conclusion is reached that the statement and argument in the "Outlines" comes in conflict with statements in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon says that nine years after a certain sign of the birth of Christ had been given, the Nephites began to reckon their time from that event, the sign of Christ's birth.—III Nephi 2: 8. There was given them also a sign of His crucifixion, viz., tremendous earthquakes, and tempests to be followed by three days of darkness.

And now it came to pass, if there was no mistake made by this man [the one who kept the Nephite records], in the reckoning of our time, the thirty and third year had passed away, and the people began to look with great earnestness for the sign which had been given by the Prophet Samuel, the Lamanite; yea, for the time that there should be darkness for the space of three days over the face of the land. * * * And it came to pass in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, in the fourth day of the month, there arose a great storm, such an one as had never been known in all the land. (III Nephi).

Then follows a description of the earthquakes and the three days darkness which was the sign to them of Messiah's crucifixion. But this is said to have occurred in the thirty-fourth year, in the first month, and on the fourth day of the month from the time the sign of Messiah's birth, and hence Jesus must have been thirty-three years and three days old (for since the Nephites reckoned their time from the day the sign of Christ's birth was given, they reckoned from one day before His birth, which is here dropped) instead of just thirty-three years old—a discrepancy of three days.

There are two things which make it impossible for any opponent of the Book of Mormon to gain any advantage by this seeming discrepancy:

First: He must prove that there was no mistake made by the Nephite historian who kept the Nephite records at that time; for the correctness of the time fixed in Mormon's abridgement of III Nephi for the appearance of the sign of Messiah's crucifixion as being in the thirty-fourth year, first month, and fourth day of the

month, from the sign of Christ's birth, is predicated upon, "if there was no mistake made by this man [the recorder]," then the time was thirty-three years and four days. But who may at present determine absolutely whether there was or was not a mistake in his reckoning?

Second: The objector must make it clear, beyond the peradventure of a doubt, that the Nephite method of computing time is identical with ours before he can establish his contradiction. Can he do that? We allow 365 days for every year, except that every fourth year we add one day to make up the difference which accumulates during the four years between civil and astronomical time. Did the Nephites do the same? Or did they follow the Hebrew method, or the Egyptian? Or did they have a system of their own? From the best authorities it would appear that the Mexicans, descendants of the Lamanites, allowed 365 days to the year, but every 52 years they added 13 intercalary days, which practically reduced their system to the same as that followed by us, only the intercalary days were not added until the lapse of 52 years, whereas we add an intercalary day ever four years. But was this a custom of the Nephites or of the Lamanites only? It is impossible to tell.

Until the objector to the Book of Mormon can show absolutely what the method of the Nephites was for computing the year, and then can prove by comparison of data that there is a conflict between the statements and the argument made in the "Outlines" and the Book of Mormon, he will not make anything by this particular objection, either to the Book of Mormon or to the argument set forth in the "Outlines."

And now in conclusion, a word upon this closing paragraph of the communication here considered. Namely, that the gentleman who brings forth these old objections to the Book of Mormon "has it within his power to do us harm by publishing these statements from our books." You must pardon me, but I don't believe it. I am a strong believer in Paul's doctrine that men can do nothing against the truth, but for it. That is, the efforts of men against the truth under the providences of God will be turned ultimately to its advantage, whatever of temporary inconvenience in the interim may have to be endured. The publication of these supposed

contradictions in our books will but advertise the work, lead men to investigate it whose attention, perhaps, would not otherwise be attracted to it; and investigation means being brought in contact with "Mormonism," and will afford opportunity for the spirit of the Lord to whisper to the hearts of such men and women that the work is divine, and thus the work of the ministry would be helped. Neither the gentleman in question nor any other man can harm this work, or the Book of Mormon. These old objections have been urged time and again during the last three-quarters of a century, but the Book of Mormon still holds its ground uninjured by the assaults made upon it; unharmed by objections made to it. It is being published in a constantly increasing number of nations, and is being accepted by the honest in heart, to whom the Spirit of God is bearing testimony that the book is true, and of divine origin.

BE STRONG.

Be strong!

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift.
 We have hard work to do, and loads to lift.
 Shun not the struggle; face it. 'Tis God's gift.

Be strong!

Say not the days are evil—Who's to blame?
 And fold the hands and acquiesce—O shame!
 Stand up, speak out, and bravely, in God's name.

Be strong!

It matters not how deep intrenched the wrong,
 How hard the battle goes, the day, how long,
 Faint not, fight on. Tomorrow comes the song.

—Selected.