

Note on B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon Geography

Some readers of my “Letter to a Doubter” have faulted the article for incorrectly characterizing the hemispheric model of the Book of Mormon employed by B. H. Roberts as an imprudent assumption on his part. As I have acknowledged in subsequent versions of my “Letter,” those readers are correct in noting that I overlooked Roberts’ consideration—and subsequent rejection—of the LGM. However, I fail to see how that error has more than the slightest bearing on my argument, which makes two points: 1) the hemispheric model presents insuperable problems for believers in and defenders of the Book of Mormon (such as the problem of numerous languages descending from Hebrew in mere centuries). And 2) the hemispheric model is a choice, a paradigm or assumption one embraces to one’s disadvantage, when other paradigms or models are readily available, such as in this case, the LGM, which is more consistent with both the text and common sense. .

More specifically, I and many others believe that Roberts too quickly dismissed the LGM, and persisted with his original assumption. Roberts thought there was no Book of Mormon evidence of other inhabitants of ancient America. However, a) lack of evidence would not be evidence of lack and b) there *is* evidence that Roberts overlooked. Just read Jacob 7, with its mention of one Sherem “who came among the people of Nephi” with “a perfect knowledge of the language of the people.” (Sorenson presents several other bits of textual evidence.) Sounds like Sherem was a non-native to me, or you wouldn’t have to mention that he had a perfect knowledge of the people’s language. If I said a stranger came to Salt Lake with a perfect knowledge of English, I think you’d assume he was not American-born.

So Roberts’ paradigm is not well founded, and it predisposes him to take seriously those troubling questions that other paradigms would have disallowed (like the Hebrew language problem). So my original point --that assumptions or faulty paradigms compound our problems and hinder our answers is not in the least affected by my initial error in saying Roberts did not consider a limited geography model. He did consider it. He chose to work on the basis of another model. And that other model, which itself *assumed* no indigenous population where the text indicates otherwise, is what complicated his Book of Mormon problems. None of this is to cast aspersions on B. H. Roberts. Roberts was a courageous intellectual, a brilliant scholar, and a faithful Latter-day Saint.

Finally, one could reply that my own model which I associate with the Book of Mormon is a paradigm, as assumed construct, that might also be wrong. To that, I heartily agree. But such susceptibility to error is perfectly consistent with my argument about paradigms. We need to realize that whatever paradigms or assumptions we do embrace, will shape and limit the kinds of answers we will find in our searching