



## BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.com/>

---

### The Bible and the Dispensations from Adam to Abraham (Chs. 16–18, 34–38)

Author(s): David Rolph Seely

Source: *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*

Editor(s): John W. Welch

Published: Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1996

Page(s): 654–662

---



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on The Book of Mormon. Archived by permission of BYU Studies.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

# **The Bible and the Dispensations from Adam to Abraham**

**(Chs. 16–18, 34–38)**

David Rolph Seely

B. H. Roberts viewed the scriptures as the foundation for any serious study of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In particular, the Bible gives information about the teaching of the gospel in the various dispensations from Adam to Christ and sets the stage for the restoration of the gospel in the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times. In Roberts's *The Seventy's Course in Theology*, published 1907–12, volume one was subtitled *A Survey of the Books of Holy Scripture*; it systematically surveyed the origins and contents of each of the scriptural books. The second year covered the history of the gospel from the premortal existence to the Restoration. Virtually all discussions of biblically related themes in *The Truth, The Way, The Life* are drawn from these and other previously published works of Roberts, where the topics are typically more fully presented and more thoroughly documented.

## **The Bible**

Roberts was a serious student of the Bible. While not a biblical scholar in the sense that he could control the primary sources in their original languages, he believed that biblical scholarship, to a point, was compatible with faith, and he was conversant with a wide range of biblical dictionaries and commentaries.<sup>1</sup> About certain elements of critical study he once wrote: "The methods of higher criticism are legitimate; that is to say, it is right to consider the various books of the scriptures . . . 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."<sup>2</sup>

Roberts was aware of the issues and movements in biblical scholarship in his day and was not afraid to discuss and answer them. In his research and writing, he relied heavily on secondary literature, for the most part well-respected and conservative Protestant biblical scholarship. At the beginning of the *Seventy's Course in Theology*, Roberts gives "A Suggested List of Books of Reference," including the LDS Standard Works and secondary literature. The secondary literature included various Bible dictionaries, histories, and commentaries, such as the works of Josephus, Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible*, Kitto's *Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature*, and Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's *A Commentary Critical and Explanatory of the Old and New Testament*. These are the most cited scholarly biblical works in *TWL*.

Roberts had a healthy respect for scholarship, but he felt free to disagree when the conclusions of scholarship did not coincide with revelation. Regarding the commentary by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, Roberts twice noted in 1907:

This is a very excellent work, and frequently quoted in the references and also in the notes of the present year's course of study. As remarked in one of the notes, the Elders who make up our ministry may not accept the doctrinal interpretation of this or any other commentary, yet its historical and critical treatises are among the most recent and valuable. . . . It is one of the best works of its kind, and represents the latest orthodox interpretations of the Scriptures, and while the Elders which make up our ministry may not accept the doctrinal interpretation of this or any other commentary, its historical and critical treatise are among the most recent and valuable.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, Roberts commented on Edersheim's distinguished work:

I take occasion here to remark that by making reference to works such as Edersheim's *Life of Jesus*, Bible Dictionaries, Ecclesiastical Histories, etc., it must not be understood that in making such references I approve the works, or even accept the correctness of the passages indicated. Such references are made that the student may consult the literature on a given point. He must make his own deductions as to the correctness of the statements and arguments of such authors. As for instance, in this very passage cited from Edersheim's really great work, I think him, in the main, wrong in his treatment of this subject of the Seventy, but our Seventies should know what so high an authority, as Edersheim is generally accepted to be, has said upon the subject.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in the outline accompanying chapter 35 of *TWL*, Roberts wrote:

Any of the standard dictionaries of the Bible or commentaries can be consulted sometimes with profit on these subjects, although they

may not be relied upon as sustaining the views of the text of this work which is so largely influenced by the “new knowledge” brought to light by the Prophet of the New Dispensation Joseph Smith. (351)

Such endorsements were not empty rhetoric. Roberts’s allegiance was to revelation and to the Restoration. In the face of any biblical problem, modern revelation always superseded that of biblical scholarship for Roberts. Nevertheless, he was fond of noting when ancient witnesses or biblical scholars supported that which was known from modern revelation. For example, he saw Josephus’s extended account of violence among Cain and his descendants as being “in harmony with the further knowledge we have of Cain in the Mosaic fragment familiar to us now as the Book of Moses” (364). In this regard, Roberts can be seen as a forerunner of subsequent Latter-day Saint scholars, like Sidney B. Sperry and Hugh W. Nibley, who would use this same method of identifying ancient parallels in support of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price.

Roberts also believed that critical issues should be meaningfully discussed with the members of the Church. For example, in the *Young Men’s Manual* for 1903–4, Roberts defended the authenticity of the biblical Creation narratives that scholars were questioning in light of newly discovered Babylonian stories; he also defended the unity and Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, which were being challenged by the documentary hypothesis.<sup>5</sup> Responding to the parallels found in the cuneiform sources, Roberts similarly acknowledged in *TWL* that the sources behind the biblical accounts had been written before the time of Moses, but he argued that they were fragments of truth known from the time of Adam:

The truth is that the outstanding facts of the creation, the fall of man, the flood, etc., have been known by the human race from the earliest historical times, from the days of Adam, in fact. . . . The variously distorted creation stories and other ancient events [were] possessed by nearly all people. But all this did not prevent the Lord from revealing the creation history to Moses, together with subsequent events; nor does this new knowledge require us to doubt the inspiration which rested upon him and that enabled him to weave into a splendid, coherent form the fragmentary truth among the ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, and other peoples. (155)<sup>6</sup>

Postulating a “common source” to account for the biblical parallels found throughout the ancient world has also been the basis of much Latter-day Saint scholarship, perhaps best exemplified by Hugh Nibley.

Possibly influenced by his familiarity with critical biblical scholarship, Roberts developed an understanding of inspiration that allowed

him to see both the hand of God and the hand of man in the Bible. Accordingly, in *TWL*, Roberts wrote that the Bible is

alleged to have been written under the inspiration of God. That does not mean that human elements are not to be found in it, but rather that a divine spirit is present in the midst of human elements, giving forth light and truth and wisdom such as is to be found in no merely human production. There is a divine spirit always present in these scripture narratives, prophecy and poetry, that makes the whole to contain a revelation of God and an account of his methods of doing things among men. All of which gives those writings an authority that does not pertain to the ordinary writings of men. (156)

## Dispensations

Roberts shared the LDS understanding of dispensations. This understanding is traceable to the Prophet Joseph Smith, who taught that “the plan of ordinances for the salvation of his posterity unto the end” was made known to Adam, “to whom Christ was first revealed.”<sup>7</sup> Roberts’s full understanding of dispensations is best understood from his presentation in other publications, especially his *Seventy’s Course in Theology, Second Year: Outline History of the Dispensations of the Gospel*. In that work, he gave a definition that is essential to understanding his reading of the scriptures:

But the word dispensation as connected with the Gospel of Jesus Christ means the opening of the heavens to men; the giving out or dispensing to them the word of God; the revealing to men in whole or in part the principles and ordinances of the Gospel; the conferring of divine authority upon certain chosen ones, by which they are empowered to act in the name, that is, in the authority of God, and for Him. . . . Strange as it may seem, in the face of such Scripture narratives, there are those among professing Christians who hold that the Gospel had no earlier origin than the time of Messiah’s ministry in the flesh. As a matter of fact, however, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has existed from the very earliest ages of the world.<sup>8</sup>

In *TWL*, Roberts discusses the Adamic dispensation (chs. 31–36); the Patriarchal period, from Adam to Noah (ch. 37); Abraham and Moses (chs. 37–38); Christ and the Meridian dispensation (chs. 39, 49–53); and finally the Restoration or the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times (chs. 47, 54–55).

**The Fall of Adam.** The discussion of the Fall in *TWL* (chs. 34–35) is a condensed narrative version of the materials outlined in the fourth volume of *Seventy’s Course in Theology*.<sup>9</sup> Roberts’s explanation of the Fall is based more on modern revelation than the Bible. He relies most

heavily on doctrines found in the Pearl of Great Price (Moses 5–7) and in Lehi’s words (2 Ne. 2). He explains the Latter-day Saint view of the Fall by juxtaposing it with Catholic and Protestant views. Rather than seeing the Fall as a tragedy, as is stressed by these others, Roberts emphasizes the necessity of the Fall, the importance of Adam and Eve’s choice in the matter, and the advantages made possible by the Fall.

In this discussion, Roberts reflects the distinctive LDS belief in the positive aspects of the Fall. This positive attitude is best illustrated in the book of Moses, where Adam and Eve both rejoice in the blessings attained by the Fall—namely, knowledge, joy, posterity, and the opportunity to be redeemed and obtain eternal life (Moses 5:10–11).<sup>10</sup> Roberts expresses the positive role of the Fall in various ways. Commenting on 2 Nephi 2:26–27, for example, Roberts says, “Then listen to the full organ-tones of the joy in which these things are recounted, and it will not be difficult to understand how the ‘Fall’ is really held to be ‘the beginning of the rise of man’” (344). Roberts delights in finding that the opinion of Harvard philosopher John Fiske

unwittingly supports the sober doctrine of the Book of Mormon that partaking of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was an absolute necessity to a life worthwhile; for thereby was brought to pass the broken harmonies of the world out of which would be forged the experiences that would lead to virile manhood, high character, human freedom, morality, and loyalty to righteousness; and therefore the “fall” is not an incident to be deplored. (349)<sup>11</sup>

**The Descendants of Cain and the Cause of the Flood.** Chapters 36–37 of *TWL* describe the Adamic dispensation’s end, Cain and his descendants, and the dispensations of Enoch and Noah. Roberts asserts that the Flood was necessitated particularly by intermarriage between the descendants of Seth (who held the priesthood) and the descendants of Cain (who did not). Roberts then speculates as to why the descendants of Cain were denied the priesthood. Roberts employs this analysis to discuss the pre-1978 LDS practice of not ordaining blacks to the priesthood.

Roberts begins with the biblical account of the cursing of Cain (Gen. 4), augmented by the account in the Pearl of Great Price (Moses 5). Roberts notes that Cain and his descendants were involved in secret combinations to work violence and to “murder to get gain” (Moses 5:31), and he cites a passage from Josephus that also describes Cain and his descendants as being involved in robberies and violence (364).<sup>12</sup> Roberts connects this report with the biblical mention of violence in the earth as one of the causes for the Flood (Gen. 6:5, 13).

Next, Roberts points out that the “sons of God” took wives from among the “daughters of men” (Gen. 6:1–4; Moses 8:13–14 says the “sons of men” took wives from the daughters of Noah’s sons, who were called the “sons of God”). Roberts concludes that the phrase “sons of God” refers to the descendants of Seth (because Moses 8:13 calls the sons of Noah the “sons of God”), while the phrase “daughters of men” refers to the descendants of Cain, who are “cursed . . . pertaining to the Priesthood” (Abr. 1:26).<sup>13</sup>

Roberts’s arguments can be better understood in light of his previous discussions of this topic in *Seventy’s Course in Theology*,<sup>14</sup> as well as the scriptural evidence and secondary literature cited there, for he was not the first to form such opinions. As he often notes, the identification of the “sons of God” with the descendants of Seth and the “daughters of men” with descendants of Cain is made in Protestant Bible dictionaries.<sup>15</sup> Roberts viewed this identification as confirmation of his interpretation of the Pearl of Great Price:

It is gratifying to know that the results of the latest deductions of Biblical scholars favors the views presented in the Book of Moses: “The interpretation, however, which is now most generally received, is that which understands by ‘the sons of the Elohim’ the family and descendants of Seth, and by ‘the daughters of man (Adam),’ the women of the family of Cain.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition, a note on Genesis 6:1–22 in the commentary by Jamieson, Faussett, and Brown, not cited by Roberts, states:

[Verse] 2. the sons of God saw the daughters of men—By the former is meant the family of Seth, who were professedly religious; by the latter, the descendants of apostate Cain. Mixed marriages between parties of opposite principles and practice were necessarily sources of extensive corruption. The women, irreligious themselves, would, as wives and mothers, exert an influence fatal to the existence of religion in their household, and consequently the people of that later age sank to the lowest depravity.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Seventy’s Course in Theology*, Roberts included a short outline and discussion on the “American Negro Race Problem.”<sup>18</sup> In that section, he included a citation from a book entitled *The Color Line: A Brief in Behalf of the Unborn*<sup>19</sup> that attempted to justify the segregation and social separation practiced in the South (where Roberts served as mission president, 1883–85) on the grounds that social relations between blacks and whites would eventually result in intermarriage and what the author called “mongrelization of the Southern people.”<sup>20</sup> Interracial marriages were, at the least, strongly discouraged in most

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States cultures.<sup>21</sup> Because Roberts refers in *TWL* to the offspring of such intermarriages as a “mongrel race” that “was part of the wickedness which prepared [the] antediluvian world for its destruction” (370), he may have derived his terminology from *The Color Line*.

At the end of chapter 37, Roberts adds a discussion, not found earlier,<sup>22</sup> in which he attempts to explain the reasons for the Latter-day Saint “denial of right to the priesthood” (372) to the blacks. Roberts argues that the “limitations of certain races” are due to their performance in the premortal life (371). The idea that blacks were denied priesthood based on some unworthiness in the previous existence was not original with Roberts.<sup>23</sup> While he supported the standard LDS practice of his day, it is notable that Roberts was sensitive enough to remove from his discussion any reference to skin color (363). The 1978 change in LDS doctrine reminds all of the perils of speculation such as Roberts’s and others’ on this matter. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie expressed shortly after the 1978 revelation:

Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world. . . . It doesn’t make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June of this year [1978].<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay has introduced only a few of the main concepts and historical characteristics of Roberts’s use of the Old Testament. Other topics, such as his rejection of higher criticism as practiced by biblical scholars of his day, are discussed elsewhere (see xxiv–xxvi above and chapter notes below). In sum, Roberts made extensive use of the Bible in *TWL*, as he did throughout all of his doctrinal works. While he acquiesced in many of the normal preferences and some of the prejudices of his day, he supplemented his arguments with ideas found in standard biblical commentaries only so long as they were not inconsistent with revelation. He especially emphasized and understood the biblical word of God in light of his readings of the books of Moses and Abraham, the Book of Mormon, and the revelations received by the prophet-teacher Joseph Smith.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Roberts is described by Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 112–22. Barlow states that Roberts “was, among Church officials, the best biblical scholar Mormonism produced in its first century. He possessed a formidable mind, a voracious appetite for learning, and a deep and rare candor to leaven his profound religious commitments.” *Mormons and the Bible*, 113.

<sup>2</sup>B. H. Roberts, “Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon,” *Improvement Era* 14 (June 1911): 667–68. Cited in Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 114. While he recognized such inquiries “as proper,” Roberts found “that when one enters into the details of those methods, . . . we must disagree as to the correctness of many of the conclusions arrived at by that method.” Roberts, “Higher Criticism,” 668.

<sup>3</sup>*Seventy’s Course in Theology* 1:xii, 23.

<sup>4</sup>*Seventy’s Course in Theology* 1:1.

<sup>5</sup>*Young Men’s Manual* 1903–4 (no. 7), ch. 1.

<sup>6</sup>See also Joseph F. Smith, *Journal of Discourses* 15:325–26.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 167. For a survey of the Latter-day Saint understanding of this concept, see Courtney J. Lassetter, “Dispensations of the Gospel,” in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:388–90.

<sup>8</sup>*Seventy’s Course in Theology* 2:37–38, 100.

<sup>9</sup>*Seventy’s Course in Theology* 4:35–45.

<sup>10</sup>See also the statement by Robert J. Matthews: “The four standard works and the teachings of many prominent leaders of the Church are the sources for the LDS doctrine of the Fall. These sources dwell at length on the beneficial effects of the Fall as part of God’s ‘great plan of happiness’ (Alma 42:8) for his children and testify that Adam and Eve are to be honored for their actions.” “Fall of Adam,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2:485.

<sup>11</sup>The distinctiveness of the LDS position on the Fall has been noted by those outside the Church. One Protestant dictionary of Christianity says, “In Mormon teaching, further, the fall of man is considered a fall upward!” Anthony A. Hoekema, “Mormonism,” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1974), 678–79.

<sup>12</sup>See also Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.2.

<sup>13</sup>Joseph Fielding Smith interpreted Moses 8:13–14 in a broader sense as referring not to ethnic distinctions, but rather to the idea that the “daughters of God” were members of the covenant who were marrying outside of the Church. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957–66), 1:136–37.

<sup>14</sup>*Seventy’s Course in Theology* 1:163–66, 2:78–80.

<sup>15</sup>See the articles on “Noah” in Smith’s *Dictionary of the Bible* as well as in Kitto’s *Cyclopaedia*. In fact, these articles trace this identification back to various of the early Christian Fathers.

<sup>16</sup>*Seventy’s Course in Theology* 2:80, quoting from Smith’s *Dictionary of the Bible*, “Noah.”

<sup>17</sup>Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary*, 21.

<sup>18</sup>*Seventy’s Course in Theology* 1:163–66.

<sup>19</sup>William Benjamin Smith, *The Color Line: A Brief in Behalf of the Unborn* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1905), 12. Earlier, Roberts quoted Huxley on “mongrels” and “hybrids” to argue against natural evolution in “Man’s Relationship to Deity,” published serially in the *Contributor* 10 (1889) and reprinted in B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1901), 264.

<sup>20</sup>*Seventy’s Course in Theology* 1:166.

<sup>21</sup>For example, in 1858 Abraham Lincoln said, “I am not, nor ever have been in favor of . . . , qualifying [blacks] to intermarry with white people.” Quoted in Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 55. Some state laws prohibited interracial marriages until the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

<sup>22</sup>At the end of *Seventy’s Course in Theology* 1:163–66, Roberts included a “Special Lesson” entitled “The Law of the Lord in Ancient and Modern Revelation Applied to the American Negro Race Problem,” in which he set forth a very brief outline of the race issue but did not mention priesthood.

<sup>23</sup>For a discussion of the various explanations for the denial of priesthood to the blacks, see Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Spring 1973): 11–68. See also Alan Cherry and Jessie L. Embry, “Blacks” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 1:125–27, and Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 526–28.

<sup>24</sup>Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” a talk given to Seminary and Institute of Religion personnel at Brigham Young University, August 1978, published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1981): 152–55.