

‘Spalding theory’ re-examined

by Dean C. Jessee

Deseret News Church Section
week ending August 20, 1977, pp 3-5

13 years with manuscripts

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He published original research on the Book of Mormon manuscripts in *BYU Studies* in 1970 and has contributed articles to the *Ensign*, *Western History Quarterly Journal*, *Journal of Mormon History* and several publications prepared by the Historical Department of the Church.

Brother Jessee is a former high councilor and currently serves on the Instructional Development Committee of the Church assisting in the preparation of gospel doctrine lessons for 1979-80.

A volume on the holographic writings of Joseph Smith, written by Brother Jessee, will be released next year.

Editors note: In recent weeks three southern California researchers have claimed that 12 pages of the Book of Mormon was written by Solomon Spalding a Congregationalist minister and writer who died more than 10 years before Joseph Smith received the gold plates. The Spalding controversy by no means is new. As early as 1834, the Spalding Theory was advanced by critics of the Book of Mormon seeking to discredit the Prophet and cast doubt on the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

The Church News asked Dean Jessee, a senior researcher for the Historical Department to comment on this latest attempt to revive the Spalding theory. On the next three pages are his explanations and evidences. putting to rest once again the notion that Spalding wrote any portion of the Book of Mormon.

Throughout his life, Joseph Smith gave but one explanation for the origin of the Book of Mormon: that he was directed by a divine messenger to an ancient record engraved upon gold plates buried in the hill not far from his Manchester, N.Y., home, and that he translated the writings thereon “by the gift and power of God.”

He noted in his history that no sooner had he published the book than “great opposition and much persecution followed the believers of its authenticity.” (1) Part of the opposition he faced consisted of efforts to nullify his claim of its divine origin.

By far the most persistent effort to create a humanistic explanation for the origin of the Book of Mormon originated with an ex-Mormon whose full name was Doctor Philastus Hurlbut. Having been excommunicated from the Church for immorality in June 1833, Hurlbut launched a personal crusade against Joseph Smith.

Besides threatening the Prophet’s life, which netted him a court fine and restraining order to keep the peace, Hurlbut vented his wrath in other ways. With the financial backing of an anti-Mormon committee in Kirtland, Ohio, he traveled widely in Ohio and New York gathering information about “the origin of the Book of Mormon,” and “the validity of Joseph Smith’s claims to the character of a Prophet.”

In January 1834 the anti-Mormon Kirtland committee announced a forthcoming book that would “prove the ‘Book of Mormon’ to be a fiction . . . written more than 20 years ago, in Salem, Ashtabula County, Ohio, by Solomon Spalding Esq.” The committee also promised that their book would completely divest the Mormon Prophet “of all claims to the character of an honest man.” (3)

Since Hurlbut's reputation did not lend itself to the sale of such a book, his findings were published over the name of Eber D. Howe, editor of the Painesville Telegraph, under the title, "Mormonism Unveiled" (sic). Hurlbut's "proof" for the claim that the Book of Mormon was a fiction consisted of a number of affidavits signed by people who asserted that the "historical part" of the Book of Mormon had been taken from a novel written by Solomon Spalding, (4) an ex-Congregationalist minister and Dartmouth College graduate living in New Salem (later Conneaut), Ohio, about 1810.

The affidavits bore the signatures of eight persons including Spalding's wife and brother. The signers claimed to have heard Spalding read portions of his novel to them some 22 years previous, and that it told about "the first settlers of America," who were "descendants of the Jews or lost tribes," and that they had traveled "from Jerusalem by land and sea till they arrived in America," where they had "separated into two distinct nations" called the "Nephites" and "Lamanites," and that they had destroyed themselves in wars upon this land. (5)

But the testimonies of Hurlbut's witnesses had such a suspicious similarity to them, both in content and wording, that serious students of the Book of Mormon have never regarded them as much more than a product of Hurlbut's imagination or the efforts of a disgruntled apostate to satisfy his personal animosity toward Joseph Smith.

During the research phase of his book Hurlbut did locate Spalding's manuscript in the possession of the novelist's widow, but he was disappointed in its lack of similarity to the Book of Mormon.

To balance this misfortune, his "witnesses" conveniently remembered that Spalding had told them that "he had altered his first plan of writing, by going farther back with dates, and writing in the old scripture style," and that the earlier manuscript Hurlbut had found bore "no resemblance" to the document Spalding had read to them. (6)

This important recollection assured a long life for the Spalding theory by opening the door for another manuscript. The second-manuscript theory became especially useful following the discovery in 1884 in Hawaii of the manuscript Hurlbut had obtained from Mrs. Spalding. The document was inadvertently located by Oberlin College Pres. James H. Fairchild among papers of Howe's Painesville Telegraph successor, L. L. Rice. It was eventually filed in the Oberlin College archives in Oberlin, Ohio where it remains today. (See Exhibit A)

The discovery of the Spalding manuscript substantiated the wisdom of Hurlbut and Howe in not publishing it or drawing further attention to it. The discovery also underlined the importance of the second manuscript hypothesis in perpetuating the Spalding theory.

The document bears no resemblance to the Book of Mormon that could not be found in many other books written in the same language. It is not written in the same style, nor are there common incidents or names.

The Book of Mormon is highly religious in tone, the Spalding manuscript entirely secular. Spalding's novel is the story of a shipload of Romans traveling to England in the days of Constantine who were blown off course and landed in America where their activities merged with the native tribes of the country. The manuscript is mainly a pedestrian account of their civilization and conflicts. (7)

In the decades that followed the publication of Howe's book, additional statements came to light that on the surface appeared to refine and add weight to the original Hurlbut affidavits. Among these was a letter published in the Boston Recorder in 1839 over the signature of Mrs. Matilda [4] Davison, Spalding's widow, who had remarried after her husband's death in 1816; and another, printed in Washington D. C. in 1880 by Mrs. Matilda Spalding McKinstry, a

daughter of Solomon. But these and other statements on the subject contained so many inconsistencies and evidences of fraud as to render them unreliable.

An important thrust of the later Spalding literature, especially after 1884, was to develop the theory of the second manuscript and present a plausible explanation of how Joseph Smith obtained it. As the theme developed, it was reasoned that the Spalding manuscript found by Hurlbut and eventually deposited at Oberlin, titled "Manuscript Story," was an early version of another document titled "Manuscript Found" and that it was really the latter item that Joseph Smith had used as the historical basis for the Book of Mormon. (8)

However plain the double manuscript theory may have appeared to its proponents, the source material has been less than convincing.

When Hurlbut visited Mrs. Spalding in Massachusetts about her husband's novel, she told him that the document, titled "Manuscript Found," was in a family trunk in New York, but she could recall nothing of its content.

Five years later, when her statement appeared in the Boston Recorder, she showed a surprising rejuvenation of memory. She described the manuscript in detail and stated definitely that, after her husband had submitted it to the Pittsburgh printer Robert Patterson, it was returned to her and she had "carefully preserved" it until she gave it to Hurlbut in 1834 and that he had not returned it. Her statements did not agree with later statements that Sidney Rigdon had stolen the manuscript from Patterson.

Further indication that the double manuscript theory is a forced interpretation is seen from the fact that the Spalding document at Oberlin contains no holograph title. Someone other than Spalding has written "Solomon Spaulding's Writings" in ink on a cover page, and then in light pencil over the top of this, the same hand has added "Manuscript Story" and "Conneaut Creek."

There is nothing on the manuscript itself to suggest that Spalding ever wrote more than the one document, or that he was ever aware of the title "Manuscript Story," or that the document may not originally have been titled "Manuscript Found" and that someone removed it and supplied a title that would help perpetuate the theory.

The sources that focus upon the method by which the Spalding novel was supposed to have come into the hands of Joseph Smith are equally unconvincing. One writer postulated that Joseph himself had stolen the manuscript from Spalding's wife's brother. Others contended that Sidney Rigdon had obtained it. One suggestion identified a "mysterious stranger" seen in the Smith neighborhood fifty years previous as Rigdon.

However, the most popular view was that Rigdon stole the manuscript while working at the Patterson printing shop in Pittsburgh, Pa., in the early 1800s.

But throughout his life — even when he became disillusioned with Joseph Smith — Rigdon always maintained that he never saw Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon until after the book was published. Nor is there evidence that he was ever in Pittsburgh before 1822, six years after Spalding's death.

The Spalding theory has dominated secular explanations for the origin of the Book of Mormon well into the 20th century. But its popularity is based more on the conviction that comes from age and frequent repetition than any sound evidence.

The theory was born in a spirit of rancor and animosity and was perpetuated chiefly by those who sought to lash back at Joseph Smith and Mormonism. The weight of scholarly studies in the field of Mormon history during the last 30 years has effectively rejected the Spalding

theory as a credible alternative to Joseph Smith's explanation for the origin of the Book of Mormon.

That the Spalding theory has not found its final resting place became clear when the Los Angeles Times on June 25, 1977, announced that three California researchers, Wayne Cowdrey, Howard Davis, and Donald Scales, had found evidence that Solomon Spalding had written a portion of the original Book of Mormon manuscript and that handwriting experts had substantiated their conclusion.

The implication of this announcement was that if Spalding (who died in 1816) wrote part of the Book of Mormon manuscript, Joseph Smith could not have translated it from ancient records by the gift and power of God, as he claimed.

The portion of the surviving Book of Mormon manuscript in question comprises 12 pages of the text covering I Nephi 4:20 to I Nephi 12:8. Since handwriting samples of all those known to have served as clerks to Joseph Smith in transcribing the Book of Mormon have not been found, these 12 pages were designated as having been written by an unidentified scribe when a study was made of the manuscript in 1969. (9) (See Exhibit B)

Since then, external evidence has pointed to Martin Harris as the probable writer of the pages in question, but samples of his early handwriting have not been located to substantiate this.

That the announcement of a handwriting connection between Solomon Spalding and the Book of Mormon is premature, if not absurd, is clear from events that have taken place since the original announcement, and from evidence that was apparently ignored by advocates of the handwriting connection.

1. Contrary to published reports, the conclusion of handwriting authorities has not been final.

The announcement of a handwriting connection between the Book of Mormon manuscript and Solomon Spalding received unwarranted prestige and credibility from the assertion that three renowned handwriting experts, Henry Silver, William Kaye, and Howard Doulder, had independently examined the two documents and concluded that Spalding was indeed the writer of both.

In the weeks following the announcement all three experts visited the Church archives in Salt Lake City to study the handwriting of the Book of Mormon manuscript. The fact of their coming indicated that final conclusions had not been reached, and each of them confirmed this verbally. Since then, Henry Silver has withdrawn from further involvement in the issue after stating that he had been misrepresented in published statements on the subject.

2. The resurrection of the Spalding theory, even with its new handwriting twist, raises the same objections that made the original Hurlbut version so untenable.

These include such problems as the reliability of the original source material in the face of Hurlbut's extreme bias against Joseph Smith; the failure of Sidney Rigdon to ever contradict Joseph Smith's claim of the divine origin of the Book of Mormon, especially after Rigdon's rejection by Joseph Smith and excommunication from the Church; and the problem of literary style when comparing the Book of Mormon with Spalding's writings and assuming that the latter wrote the former.

Beyond this, the present version of the Spalding theory presents a new problem by contradicting the earlier one. An important point mentioned in all of the Hurlbut affidavits (obviously prompted by Hurlbut himself to soften the lack of similarity he found between the Spalding manuscript and the Book of Mormon was that Spalding provided the "historical part" of the Book of Mormon and that Joseph Smith or Sidney Rigdon supplied the religious part. By

attributing 12 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript to Spalding the present advocates wipe away this distinction made by Hurlbut's witnesses.

As James Fairchild pointed out, the contrast between the Book of Mormon and the Spalding manuscript must have been very striking for Hurlbut, to have all eight of his witnesses, after 22 years, remember that precise detail.

In reality, the religious message of the Book of Mormon is so tightly interwoven with its history that it would be inconceivable to assume that the two themes were produced separately, and later interpolated. Further, it is unlikely that the strong-minded and erudite Sidney Rigdon, who was 12 years Joseph Smith's senior, would have accepted the servile task of weaving Joseph's religious ideas in with Spalding's historical novel, and ever after remain silent about it. (10) [5]

3. The unidentified scribe of the 12 Book of Mormon pages also wrote the manuscript of Section 56 of the Doctrine and Covenants. (See Exhibit C)

The same handwriting characteristics that identify the Book of Mormon clerk are also present in the Section 56 manuscript. (Note Exhibits B, C, D) This forces the conclusion that if Spalding wrote the 12 pages of the Book of Mormon, he also regulated Mormon church affairs in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1831. His death in Pennsylvania in 1816 renders this miraculous.

4. handwriting differences do not support the allegation that Solomon Spalding wrote 12 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript.

The science of handwriting identification rests upon the fact that a person's writing, like his speech, is an habitual skill that is performed unconsciously, and changes but very gradually under normal circumstances. Each person's handwriting has certain characteristics that individually or in combination render his or her handwriting unique.

In addition to the formation of letters, these characteristics include many other aspects of writing such as slant, size, proportion, pen-lifts, compactness, arrangement, shading and rhythm. Recognizing that any handwriting in the same language will have similarities, the question of whether or not two documents were written by the same individual must focus upon the nature and quality of differences.

The examination of a person's standard handwriting determines the range of acceptable differences which must serve as the yardstick for measuring questioned samples. (11) The handwriting of both Spalding and the writer of the 12 Book of Mormon pages contains numerous peculiarities that are outside of the range of acceptable diversity for the other. The combination of these differences renders each manuscript unique. Some of the more obvious differences are as follows:

A. The formation of the capital letters A, C, D, E, H, I, K, L, N, P, S, T, U, W, the lower-case letters c, s, r, x, the combination "wh" and the ampersand (&). (See Exhibit D)

The personal pronoun "I" is frequently written with a small "i" by the Book of Mormon writer, a peculiarity that never occurs with Spalding.

Unlike the Book of Mormon scribe, Spalding uses the ampersand (&) almost exclusively in the place of "and."

The old form "[]" is used extensively by Spalding for his lower-case, single "s," a peculiarity that does not occur in the Book of Mormon.

Spalding's lower-case "c" is written like an undotted "i." It has no curve to it, unlike that of the Book of Mormon writer.

B. The two manuscripts do not show the same continuity and flow in their word formation. The Book of Mormon writer's habit of lifting his pen from the paper in the formation

of words occurs with more frequency and in different places than does Spalding's. (See Exhibit D)

C. A comparison of the penmanship of the two manuscripts shows that Spalding's Dartmouth College education made him a better penman than the Book of Mormon clerk. However, if Spalding is accepted as the author of the 12 Book of Mormon pages, it is impossible to explain the deterioration of his penmanship following the writing of his earlier "Manuscript Story."

D. Spalding shows greater skill as a penman than does the Book of Mormon scribe:

Both writers misspell different words and the Book of Mormon scribe misspells more simple words. For example, the Book of Mormon scribe consistently writes the words, "shal," "uppon," "menny," and "ware" (were), which are spelled correctly by Spalding.

Word divisions from one line to the next show less understanding of the convention of hyphens, and involve more single syllable words on the part of the Book of Mormon writer than with Spalding: "uppon," "inheritance-e," "wa-s," "m-e," "kne-w," "M-ultitude," "mist-t," "ma-le."

The Book of Mormon scribe frequently begins a new line with a capital letter even though it is in the middle of a sentence, a trait completely absent in Spalding's writings.

The capitalization of names and proper nouns is neglected much more often by the Book of Mormon writer than by Spalding. (sam, laman, lemuel, israel, jerusalem, egipt, etc.)

Punctuation habits in the two manuscripts are drastically different. Spalding punctuates freely, and frequently uses dashes as a form of punctuation. The Book of Mormon clerk uses no punctuation at all.

This raises a question with the two-manuscripts theory. If the "Manuscript Story" represents an early version of Spalding's novel and the Book of Mormon his later, polished version, why is the punctuation less correct in the final draft? Here would be a case of the college graduate Spalding carefully punctuating his rough draft, but leaving his final manuscript for the unlearned Joseph Smith to punctuate.

5. Differences in literary style between the Spalding manuscript and the 12 pages of the Book of Mormon do not lend themselves to the theory of single authorship of the two documents.

Spalding's writings contain more complicated and a wider variety of sentence structure than does the Book of Mormon; his vocabulary is more complex and word choices more descriptive; his verb forms are more varied; his tenses more complicated and he makes extensive use of metaphors and of participial constructions, many of which leave a dangling modifier.

On the other hand, the Book of Mormon scribe uses less complicated sentences and words; his verb forms are less complex; he uses few participial phrases; his tenses are predominantly simple present and past; his symbolism does not include metaphors and he makes extensive use of the same transitional words and phrases.

It is unlikely that a writer of Spalding's imagination and ability would consider the stylistically simple Book of Mormon prose as a sequel to his "Manuscript Story."

6. The similarity of paper and ink on the pages that precede and follow the writing of the unidentified scribe does not support the theory that Spalding wrote the 12 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript.

The handwriting of Joseph Smith's known clerks appears on the pages immediately preceding and following those of the unidentified scribe (See Exhibit B). If the 12 pages of the unidentified scribe were actually written by Solomon Spalding some 123 years before the

material that precedes and follows it, there would be some indication of this in the paper quality or size, the ink color or tone, or the folded or torn edges of the paper, but in each of these instances, before and after the section in question, the match is perfect: the paper and ink are the same.

7 The writer on the 12 pages wrote on other pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript besides the 12, AFTER Joseph Smith's scribes had completed the text of those pages.

For the purposes of reference, if the surviving pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript were numbered consecutively, the 12 pages written by the unidentified scribe would comprise numbers 5 to 16.

In addition to writing those 12 pages, the same writer added summary headings on pages 2 and 3 and a chapter heading on page 24, AFTER the text of those pages was written by Joseph Smith's clerks Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer. Page two is titled "Nephi goeth up to Jerusalem to bring the records of the Jews," and page three, "The brethren of Nephi smite him with a Rod." It would have been impossible for these summary headings to have been written prior to the content of the pages they summarize.

Also, on page 24, "Chapter 5th" has been inserted by the same writer at the close of a sentence in the text written by John Whitmer. It would have been impossible for the unidentified scribe to have written the chapter heading in the right place on the page before the text around it was written.

These insertions indicate that the writer of the 12 pages of I Nephi must have been with Joseph Smith and his clerks sometime after they wrote the text of pages 2, 3, and 24, about 1829. Here again, Solomon Spaulding's death in 1816 bars him from the picture.

NOTES

Published sources pertaining to the Spaulding theory include the following: E. D. Howe *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio, 1834); Robert Patterson, *Who Wrote the Book of Mormon* (Philadelphia, 1882); George Reynolds *The Myth of the Manuscript Found* (Salt Lake City, 1883); *Public Discussion of the Issues Between the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and The Church of Christ (Disciples)*, held in Kirtland, Ohio, Beginning February 12th, and Closing March 8th, 1884, between E. L. Kelly of the R. C. of J. C. of Latter Day Saints, and Clark Braden, of the Church of Christ (St. Louis, 1884); James H. Fairchild, "Manuscript of Solomon Spaulding and the Book of Mormon." *Western Reserve Historical Society* (March 23, 1886); Fawn Brody, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith The Mormon Prophet* (New York, 1963); Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness For Christ in America*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, 1967).

(1) Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City, 1957) 4:461, 1:84.

(2) *Painesville Telegraph* (Painesville, Ohio), January 31, 1834.

(3) *Ibid.*

(4) The spelling of Spaulding's name follows a holograph deed dated 25 Jan. 1811 at Salem, Ohio, photocopy at Oberlin College archives, Oberlin, Ohio, and early spelling of his name by contemporaries.

(5) Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (sic), pp. 279-287.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 288.

(7) The Spaulding manuscript was first published by the Reorganized Church in 1885 under the title, *The "Manuscript found,"* or *"Manuscript story,"* (Lamoni, Iowa, 1885). The following year it was published in Salt Lake City with nearly the same title.

(8) Two versions of the plural manuscript theory are set forth in Charles Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon* (Cincinnati, 1914), pp. 184-187, and *The Bradett and Kelley Debate*, pp. 216-217.

(9) Dean Jones, "The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript," *Brigham Young University Studies* 10 (Spring 1970), 259-278.

(10) Janet H. Fairchild, "Manuscript of Solomon Spaulding and the Book of Mormon," *Western Reserve Historical Society* (March 23, 1886) p. 197.

(11) Albert S. Osborn, *Questioned Documents* (New York, 1929).

Exhibit A
Page from Spalding
manuscript exhibits
regular capitali-
zation and punctuation
— unlike Book of
Mormon manuscript
with allegedly
similar handwriting.

96
Sacks were provided from course & cloth
to receive the most valuable part of
our goods & furniture — These were
thrown across three of the Mann-
moons — The other was capari-
foned, in a manner too tedious to
describe for the accommodation of
of our women & children — They
were were all mounted upon him
& went with great convenience &
safety. ~~Being thus prepared & ready~~
I then having resided among the
Deliwans two years — & being
prepared to take our departure
The King & his chiefs & many of
his principal subjects came forward
to take an affectionate farewell.
This was done in both sides, with
with mutual expressions of the
most ardent & sincere friendship
& the most earnest wishes of pro-
sperity for future prosperity & happiness.

if it had been laban and i also spoken
I should carry the impression which we
Baton of bapt to my elder brethren which is
the will and i also made him that he sh
We and he ^{is} saying that i shake of the
the church and that i was truly that
I had ~~had~~ seen where here he did follow
he shake unto me many times ~~among~~

Exhibit B

Lower-case names ("laban") and personal pronouns ("i") can be seen in challenged portion of Book of Mormon manuscript; note absence of punctuation.

BOOK OF MORMON 1831 MANUSCRIPT OF SOLOMON SPALDING
SECTION 56

A	a	a	a
C	c	c	c
D	D		D
E	e	e	e
F	f		f
H	h	h	h
Personal Pronoun "I"	i	i	I
J	j	j	J
K	k		k
L	l		l
N	n	n	n
P	p	p	p
R	r	r	r
final "r"	for	for	for
S, s	s	s	s
T	t	t	t
U	u		u
W	w		w
v	v	v	v
and	and	and	and
did	did		did
which	which	which	which
had	had		had
were	were		were
after	after	After	after
shall	shal	shal	shall
upon	uppon	uppon	upon
before	before	before	before

Exhibit D Breakdown of all three shows similarities — and dissimilarities.