

## Solomon Spaulding & the Book of Mormon

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### FairMormon Solomon Spaulding and the Book of Mormon PUBLICATIONS

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**Q.** I have heard that Joseph Smith plagiarized the writings of Solomon Spaulding to produce the Book of Mormon. I know this has been refuted before, but can you help me understand this issue and get to the bottom of it?

**A.** (by Matthew B. Brown) When the Book of Mormon was first published in March of 1830 its detractors believed that it did not have a divine origin as claimed, but was an impious fraud perpetrated solely by the Prophet Joseph Smith (who was listed on the title page of the book-in accordance with federal copyright law-as the "author and proprietor").<sup>1</sup>

But in 1834 a new theory for the origin of the Book of Mormon was proposed by a man named Philastus Hurlbut.<sup>2</sup> This theory postulated that Joseph Smith was too illiterate to have produced the Book of Mormon by himself and therefore must have received some assistance. This theory claimed that Sidney Rigdon wrote the religious parts of the Book of Mormon while the historical parts were plagiarized from an unpublished manuscript written in 1812 by Solomon Spaulding-Rigdon having secretly acquired the Spaulding document from a Pittsburgh printer named Jonathan H. Lambdin.<sup>3</sup>

Philastus Hurlbut paid a visit to Spaulding's widow and after being shown her husband's unpublished document he took it with him to Eber D. Howe's print shop in Painesville, Ohio-with a promise to the widow of future publication and a share in the profits. But when Hurlbut made a closer examination of the Spaulding manuscript he did not find the parallels to the Book of Mormon that he had hoped for<sup>4</sup> and so he asserted that there must have been another manuscript written by Spaulding that was now "lost."<sup>5</sup>

When L.L. Rice bought the contents of Howe's printing establishment in 1839 he unknowingly acquired the Spaulding manuscript and eventually transported it to Honolulu, Hawaii. Rice discovered the document in 1884 while searching through his collection of papers at the request of Oberlin College president James H. Fairchild. When Rice, Fairchild, and several others compared the Spaulding manuscript with the Book of Mormon they "could detect no resemblance between the two, in general or detail." Fairchild concluded that "the theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon in the traditional manuscript of Solomon Spaulding will probably have to be relinquished."<sup>6</sup>

There are several other compelling reasons for relinquishing the Spaulding theory. In creating his conjecture Philastus Hurlbut ignored the fact that Sidney Rigdon never even saw a copy of the Book of Mormon until Parley P. Pratt personally gave him one after 15 October 1830.<sup>7</sup> Emma Smith, the Prophet's wife, declared that "no acquaintance was formed between Sidney Rigdon and the Smith family till after the Church was organized" and the Book of Mormon had already been published.<sup>8</sup> Rigdon's own assessment of the Spaulding theory was both direct and forceful. He called it "a moonshine story." He protested that he didn't even know of Solomon Spaulding's existence until Hurlbut made his accusations public and he also said that the idea that he was somehow involved with the printing office in Pittsburgh where he allegedly acquired the Spaulding manuscript was "the most base of lies, without even the shadow of truth."<sup>9</sup>

One of the most damaging refutations of the Spaulding theory comes from Oliver Cowdery, who served as the principal scribe during the majority of the Book of Mormon's translation. He forthrightly affirmed, "I wrote, with my own pen, the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages), as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as he translated it by the gift and power of God . . . . Sidney Rigdon did not write it. Mr. Spaulding did not write it. I wrote it myself, as it fell from the lips of the Prophet."<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1 Alexander Campbell wrote of the Book of Mormon: "I could swear that this book was written by one man. And as Joseph Smith is a very ignorant man and is called the author on the title page, I cannot doubt for a single moment that he is the sole author and proprietor of it. . . . It is . . . certainly Smith's fabrication" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 7 February 1831).

2 This theory was put forward in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: Telegraph Press, 1834). Joseph Smith noted in 1835 that Philastus Hurlbut, not Eber D. Howe, was the real author of *Mormonism Unveiled* (see *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 2, no. 15, December 1835, 228).

3 Hurlbut's theory asserts that in order to create robust book sales Lambdin "placed the 'Manuscript Found' of Spalding, in the hands of Rigdon, to be embellished, altered, and added to as he might think expedient" (Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 290). Hurlbut was excommunicated from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in June of 1833 (see Brigham H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948], 1:355). He first heard about the Solomon Spaulding manuscript from the Jackson family (who knew Spaulding personally) while he was lecturing against Mormonism in Pennsylvania. But when Hurlbut asked Mr. Jackson to sign an affidavit stating that there were similarities between Spaulding's manuscript and the Book of Mormon Jackson refused, insisting that "there was no agreement between them" and "express[ing] his indignation and contempt" for Hurlbut's undertaking (Benjamin Winchester, *The Origin of the Spaulding Story* [Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking, and Guilpert, 1840], 8-9).

4 Either Hurlbut or Howe wrote a letter to Spaulding's widow informing her that her husband's manuscript "did not read as they expected" and they therefore decided against publishing it (Winchester, *The Origin of the Spaulding Story*, 17).

5 Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 290.

6 *New York Observer*, 5 February 1885.

7 See Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled* (New York: O. Pratt and E. Fordham, 1838), 41; *Times and Seasons*, vol. 4, no. 18, 1 August 1843, 290. At first Sidney Rigdon expressed "considerable doubt" about the claims made for the divine origin of the Book of Mormon but was finally convinced of it when he received "a revelation from Jesus Christ, which was made known to him in a remarkable manner" (ibid., 290). This revelation is described in an early newspaper account. Rigdon decided that "he must 'receive a testimony from God.' In order to [obtain] this, he labored as he was directed by his Preceptor, almost incessantly and earnestly in praying, till at length, his mind was wrapped up in a vision; and to use his own language, 'to my astonishment I saw the different orders of professing Christians passing before my eyes, with their hearts exposed to view, and they were as corrupt as corruption itself. That society to which I belonged also passed before my eyes, and to my astonishment, it was as corrupt as the others. Last of all that little man [Parley P. Pratt] who brought me the Book of Mormon, passed before my eyes with his heart open, and it was as pure as an angel: and this was a testimony from God, that the Book of Mormon was a divine revelation'" (*Ohio Star*, 8 December 1831).

8 Joseph Smith, III, "The Spaulding Story Reexamined," 11, tract published in *Saints' Herald*, 17 March 1883.

9 Letter, 27 May 1839, Sidney Rigdon to Bartlett and Sullivan, (editors of the *Quincy Whig* newspaper), printed in George J. Adams, *Plain Facts Showing the Origin of the Spaulding Story* (Bedford, England: C. B. Merry, 1841), 21. David Whitmer emphatically stated that he "heard [Sidney] Rigdon, in the pulpit and in private conversations, declare that the Spaulding story-that he had used a book called 'The Manuscript Found' for the purpose of preparing the 'Book of Mormon'-was . . . false . . . [and] as untruthful as it is ridiculous" (*Chicago Times*, 17 October 1881).

10 Reuben Miller Journal, 21 October 1848, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah, cited in *Deseret News*, 13 April 1859.