



Behind the Spalding Controversy

by David Merrill

One of the oldest charges against the Book of Mormon was recently resurrected by three southern California researchers, Howard Davis, Wayne Cowdrey and Donald Scales. They have spent the last two years studying the relationship between the Book of Mormon and a "Manuscript Story" written between 1809 and 1816 by Congregationalist Minister Solomon Spalding.

Davis says he became interested in the Spalding theory while reading a book by Walter Martin, director of the Christian Research Institute, who was convinced "on circumstantial evidence" of the common authorship of the Book of Mormon and the Manuscript Story. Davis holds a doctor of divinity degree from California Baptist College and considers himself primarily a religious historian working on a variety of issues from science and religion to the Spalding manuscript.

He met Scales and Cowdrey in 1974 while working as a lab technician at a McDonnell-Douglas plant. According to Gretchen Passantino, spokesman for the group (also senior research consultant for the Christian Research Institute and personal secretary to Martin), Cowdrey "decided he ought to have some kind of religion, and he went back to investigate his ancestor's religion first." (Cowdrey is descended from Oliver Cowdrey, the Book of Mormon witness.)

Cowdrey was baptized in December

1975, but Scales and some other evangelical Christians began arguing with him about the Book of Mormon's validity. Cowdrey reportedly went to Davis with his growing doubts and questions "because he had a doctor of divinity degree." Scales, Cowdrey and Davis began studying together, and Cowdrey soon asked to be excommunicated.

Since then the three have "eaten, slept and breathed Solomon Spalding," according to Davis. They wrote to libraries, historical societies and religious groups asking for information about Spalding, Joseph Smith and the supposed like between them, Sidney Rigdon.

Since Spalding died in 1816, advocates of the common authorship theory must explain how a decade-old unpublished manuscript fell into Joseph Smith's hands. According to the theory, Rigdon stole the manuscript while working in the Patterson Print Shop (Spalding's publisher) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. During the next four years, the theory supposes, Rigdon traveled 300 miles north to Palmyra, met Joseph Smith, and the two rewrote Spalding's novel to include Smith's religious views.

There is a superficial resemblance between the Manuscript Story and the Book of Mormon--the idea of a Hebraic origin of the Indians--but plot, characters, tone, and writing style reveal few if any similarities between the two books. Also, Dean Jessee, in a recent *Church News* article, notes that Rigdon didn't work for Patterson until 1822--six years after Spalding died. Rigdon's con-

version to Mormonism in 1830 and his subsequent meeting with Joseph Smith are well documented. And David Whitmer, a frequent observer of the translation process, left the Church permanently but never denied that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon nor hinted at any collusion between Smith and Rigdon.

Fifty Affidavits

After two years of assiduous digging, Cowdrey, Scales and Davis have amassed fifty "affidavits" claiming that (1) Spalding actually wrote two novels, (2) the second was in biblical style, (3) Sidney Rigdon stole the second manuscript from the printer, (4) Rigdon knew Smith long before 1830, and (5) Joseph Smith expanded the purloined fiction into the Book of Mormon.

In addition to the affidavits, their book, *Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon*, will contain biographies of Rigdon, Smith and Spalding, and a chronology and itinerary putting them in the same place at the right time. However, the whole edifice rests primarily on the affidavits. Davis says he "realizes" that the verity of many of these statements (gleaned from archives, old histories and magazines) is in doubt.

According to Passantino, the three researchers only accidentally noticed that the handwriting in the unidentified scribe section of the Book of Mormon resembled Spalding's. They quickly hired three well-known, reputable handwriting analysts to examine the two documents.

Of the handwriting experts, Henry Silver has had eight years of professional training and is nationally known for his high rate of accuracy in handwriting determinations. William Kaye is also well known and sports a list of blue-chip clients—Bendix Corp., MCA, and the Ford Foundation. He also served as court witness for the Canadian Supreme Court, and he claims a 90 percent accuracy rate. Silver and Kay practice graphology, a branch of handwriting analysis that the third expert, Howard Doulder, dismisses as “fortune telling.”

Doulder worked for the Milwaukee Police Department as assistant document examiner before becoming supervisor of the Treasury Department's 38-state crime lab. In 1973 he moved to southern California and began a freelance agency for examining questioned documents.

Kaye and Doulder describe the initial writing samples supplied by the researchers as less than perfect. Kaye says he examined “one or two pages of the Book of Mormon and about 12 pages of Spalding.” Doulder described the evidence as “photographs of a small section of the Book of Mormon and some lousy photostats of Spalding's writing.” After what Doulder called “a somewhat cursory inspection” of the documents, the three analysts indicated there were “similarities.”

Armed with these preliminary opinions, Davis and the other researchers called a press conference—their “discovery” soon hit all the wire services and became national news.

Claiming he'd been misquoted by the researchers' press releases, Silver soon withdrew an angry protest. In an interview with Melvin A. Jensen, Los Angeles public communications coordinator for the Church, Silver said, “My examination, witnessed by three Mormon Church officials and one of the researchers from Los Angeles, resulted in my opinion that the photocopies of the Book of Mormon manuscript I had seen in Los Angeles were true copies of the original pages that were brought out from the Church vault. This is the only opinion I have ever given in this whole matter.” Silver said the newspaper misquoted him by saying that his testimony substantiated the claims of the researchers. “These misstatements make it appear that I had corroborated the researchers' claims,” he said. “I did not, and could not give an opinion about the photocopy I saw as being a copy of a certain Solomon Spalding handwriting because I have never seen any original handwriting by the said Spalding.”

Kaye and Doulder began preparing their final reports without Silver. Kaye flew

to Oberlin College to investigate the Spalding originals and then back to Salt Lake City to see several pages of handwriting by the scribe of Section 56 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Meanwhile, Davis, Scales and Cowdrey went ahead with a September publication date for their book without the analysts' final reports.

Davis claims that if the final reports deny common authorship, “it won't affect the book at all. Even if they did change their minds, I think it would be interesting that as soon as this thing became controversial these guys suddenly turn on it.”

“It's impossible to believe,” remarked Kaye. “I don't know how they could take (the conclusions of the final report) for granted.” He indicated that he would take “appropriate action” if the book presented his conclusions wrongly. Handwriting analysts rarely commit themselves without an exhaustive study of everything pertinent to handwriting samples and consider preliminary reports meaningless unless supported by the final report.

Vision House Publishers did not release *Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon* on September 1 as announced. According to their secretary, the publishers “had the final manuscript in August, had it typeset, and were ready to print it when the authors withdrew the last chapter.” Apparently the researchers had decided to wait for the final reports after all.

Davis tends to downplay the importance of the handwriting samples to the Spalding thesis. “The handwriting experts are just the icing on the cake,” he said. Jane Bergen, a local handwriting analyst, charges \$35 an hour for her services, and Kaye says he charges “much more than that.” So far his costs alone have included the preliminary report, the trips to Salt Lake City and Oberlin College, and his final report. Speaking for the three young researchers (two of which are unemployed), Davis said, “The handwriting experts are paid out of a special fund for that purpose established by Dr. Martin.” Passantino, however declared in a recent interview that the researchers “are not involved with the Christian Research Institute.”

Martin holds several degrees in comparative religion, including two from New York University and California Western University. He is the leading scholar for the evangelical churches on the various religions originating in the United States. His most widely read book is *Kingdom of the Cults*, an examination of the beliefs of Latter-day Saints as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and Christian Scientists. The animosity of Martin and other evangelicals toward Mormonism stems from

the LDS missionary program. Evangelicals believe missionaries should only be sent to pagans or the unreligious, and they consider the Mormon missionary program an attack against Christian religions. The Christian Research Institute is an organized response to this “attack” by the Mormon church. It supports missionaries to the Mormons, publishes pamphlets like “How to Witness to Mormons,” and engages in full time research to expose “the error of Mormonism.” The institute is entirely supported by donations from evangelicals and by profits from Martin's lectures, broadcast programs and publications.

Despite Passantino's statement to the contrary, Martin and his Christian Research Institute have raised the money for the handwriting experts, established the special fund, and supplied the institute's senior research consultant (Passantino) as ghost writer. (Passantino claims the researchers didn't “know how to write” and enlisted her aid.)

The Verdict

On September 8 Kaye reported to the researchers that further investigation “substantially confirmed” his initial opinion. While not having submitted his last word, he gave the opinion that the unidentified scribe and Solomon Spalding were the same person. He then turned the materials over to Doulder.

Doulder returned a contradictory report. “I changed my initial opinion because of the poor quality of the reproductions given us by the three researchers,” says Doulder. “Their blowups were out of proportion and fuzzy, making it impossible to see the terminal spurs, connecting strokes or line qualities. There are dissimilarities that are unexplainable and are not attributable to individual writing variations of the same author.”

After Doulder's final report, a Los Angeles TV station hosted the researchers and Doulder on a talk show. “They don't seem to care that the two reports conflicted,” he said. “So we have two experts disagreeing. So what?” Doulder would now like to continue his examination and compare the letters written by the scribe that Church officials think is responsible for the twelve Book of Mormon pages. “I would certainly love to continue this project,” Doulder said, “and settle this thing once and for all.”

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