

Spaulding Manuscript

Overview

In the early 1800s, a man named Solomon Spaulding wrote a fictional story about ancient Romans who came to North America. Some critics of the Church have claimed that Joseph Smith used the manuscript to write the Book of Mormon. This claim has been discredited many times by people inside and outside of the Church. The Book of Mormon was translated from ancient records by the gift and power of God. It has no connection with the Spaulding manuscript.

Those who do not accept the Book of Mormon as scripture offer many theories about its origin. One of the earliest theories was that the Book of Mormon was based on a manuscript by Solomon Spaulding (also spelled “Spalding”), a fictional story about early inhabitants of America.

Spaulding was born in 1761. He studied at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and was ordained a minister. Later, he left the ministry and lived in New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania until his death in 1816. In his later years, he wrote a novel, which he never published. Spaulding’s manuscript is considerably shorter than the Book of Mormon.

Similarities between his manuscript and the Book of Mormon are general and superficial. Spaulding’s fiction is about a group of Romans blown off course on a journey to Britain who arrive instead in America. One of the Romans narrates the adventures of the group and the history and culture of the people they find in America. A major portion of the manuscript describes two nations near the Ohio River. After a long era of peace between the two nations, a prince of one nation elopes with a princess of the other nation. Because of political intrigue, the elopement results in a great war between the two nations and the loss of much life but the ultimate vindication of the prince and his princess.

In 1833 a committee of Ohio residents hired Philastus Hurlbut, who had been excommunicated from the Church, to collect information about Joseph Smith and the origins of the Book of Mormon. They hoped to convince their neighbors that Joseph had deceived the poor into following him. As part of his task, Hurlbut spoke with several people from Ohio who claimed to have seen the Spaulding manuscript. These people signed affidavits asserting that the Book of Mormon was based on Spaulding’s story.

In spite of these claims, neither Hurlbut nor other critics of the Church published the Spaulding Manuscript at that time even though it was in their possession. Eventually, the manuscript was lost. In 1884, a man named L. L. Rice found the manuscript among some papers he had purchased, and he turned it over to Oberlin College in Ohio. Rice and James H. Fairchild, president of Oberlin College, examined the manuscript. Neither man was a member of the Church, and both certified that the manuscript could not have been the source of the Book of Mormon. The Church published Spaulding’s work in 1886.

Like other attempts to discredit the Book of Mormon, the theory of the Spaulding manuscript is based on the belief that an unlearned man such as Joseph Smith could not have created a book as detailed and rich as the Book of Mormon and that he, therefore, must have obtained the content from some other source. In fact, 11 witnesses testified that they saw the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. Though some of these people left the Church, they never denied their testimony that they saw the plates and that the Book of Mormon was the word of God.

Joseph Smith himself explained, “By the power of God I translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics, the knowledge of which was lost to the world, in which wonderful event I stood alone, an unlearned youth, to combat the worldly wisdom and multiplied ignorance of eighteen centuries, with a new revelation” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* [2007], 60).

Those who want to know if the Book of Mormon is true can seek such knowledge from the Holy Ghost, which is promised to all who sincerely ask. The Book of Mormon prophet Moroni wrote: “When ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 10:4).

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Learning Resources

General Resources

Noel B. Reynolds, “The Authorship of the Book of Mormon,” BYU Speeches

“History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 Addenda,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*

“Manuscript found: the complete original ‘Spaulding manuscript,’” Religious Studies Center

Church Magazines

“I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, June 1992

“New Developments in Book of Mormon Research,” *Ensign*, February 1988

Bruce A. Van Orden, “George Reynolds: Loyal Friend of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, August 1986

Keith W. Perkins, “Francis W. Kirkham: A ‘New Witness’ for the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, July 1984

“Would you respond to the theories that the Book of Mormon is based on the Spaulding manuscript or on Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews*?” *Ensign*, September 1976

Study Manuals

“Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon and Restoration of the Priesthood”

Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual, chapter 5
