

A simple explanation works best for the Restoration

By Daniel Peterson, For the Deseret News
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We left off last week with the notion that the Book of Mormon was plagiarized from a manuscript written by Solomon Spalding, who had died in 1816. Sidney Rigdon, so the story goes, stole the work from Spalding's family and, for whatever reason, used it to set the young farmer Joseph Smith up as a prophet.

Though lacking any real historical support, this was the dominant non-Mormon theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon for more than a century. In recent decades, though, it's fallen on hard times.

It didn't help, probably, that, when Spalding's lost manuscript was found, it was also found to bear no significant resemblance to the Book of Mormon.

Still, much like doomsday cultists when the date of their predicted apocalypse passes uneventfully, the Spalding faithful soon regained their balance: There was, they declared, a previously unknown and still unseen second manuscript that would, no doubt, prove to be the source of the Book of Mormon when and if it were ever actually discovered.

Few dispassionate observers doubt that, if such a second manuscript ever actually turned up and failed to fit their requirements, they would shortly be proclaiming the existence of a third hypothetical manuscript.

For this and many other reasons, few serious scholars, if any—whether believing Latter-day Saints or not—pay the Spalding theory much attention any more. Even the late Fawn Brodie, no friend of Joseph Smith or Mormonism, denied Solomon Spalding any role in the production of the Mormon "keystone" scripture.

In fact, the latest attempt to resuscitate the theory has been thoroughly thrashed, yet again, on both historical and statistical grounds. (See, for example, the studies by G. Bruce Schaalje, Matthew Roper and Paul Fields in "Mormon Studies Review" 23/1, online"

TARGET="_blank">href="http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/?vol=23&num=1">online.

The pendulum among critics has now swung back to regarding Joseph Smith himself as the sole or principal author of the book, notwithstanding the unanimous consensus of his wife and of those who knew him in the late 1820s that writing such a book was far beyond his capacities and educational level.

Modern critics of the Book of Mormon seem to be following the advice given in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story "The Sign of the Four": "How often have I said to you,"

Sherlock Holmes admonishes Dr. Watson, "that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?"

For them, a divine origin for the Book of Mormon is flatly impossible, and so, out of need, they latch onto a highly improbable alternative. Yet it's an alternative that, as we've seen, accounts for very little even if granted.

A hypothetical Spalding manuscript wouldn't make any golden plates or, even, anything that looked like gold. Nor a breastplate. Nor a sword. Nor the Urim and Thummim. Nor the Liahona. Nor, for that matter, the large number of other plates seen by witnesses. Nor would it produce a convincing "angel" and an impressive voice of "God." Nor, alternatively, would it find eleven hallucinating madmen who would all "see" and "hear" these things.

For many centuries, the Ptolemaic model of the solar system, with the earth at the center and the sun and moon and planets and stars revolving around it, reigned virtually unquestioned among pagans and Christians, Jews and Muslims. But, as the years went by, more and more precise observational data seemed to conflict with what Ptolemy's system predicted. So astronomers before Copernicus tried to fix the model, adding cycles and epicycles and other ad hoc devices in order, as the slogan put it, "to save the appearances."

Ultimately, though, the system became so unwieldy and cumbersome—so much like one of the cartoonist Rube Goldberg's famously complicated gadgets—that it simply couldn't be sustained. And so, when Nicolaus Copernicus came along with his simpler heliocentric model, it was rapidly accepted by many scientists despite its own problems.

To this point, attempts to explain Joseph Smith's prophetic claims and revealed scriptures away naturalistically, taken altogether, seem reminiscent of the Ptolemaic model in its terminal stages. They rely on an improbable assemblage, a complex gadget, perfectly composed of never-diagnosed madmen, cunning but sincere frauds that might have been unconscious, undetected and apparently pointless conspiracies, brilliant dunces, and mysteriously invisible manuscripts woven into the story as needed.

"Don't multiply entities unnecessarily," says William of Occam's famous "Razor." Don't make explanations unnecessarily complex.

Joseph Smith's explanation is far simpler.

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