



Type: Magazine Article

Dr. Widtsoe's Reply to Rev. Spalding

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 16, No. 6 (April 1913), pp. 616–619

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

therefore not eight, but eleven, and the question upon which we seem to differ is as to the value of the practical agreement of eleven admittedly competent Orientalists.

If I am to convince you that there is conclusive value in the testimony adduced, my argument must be *AD HOMINEM*, a method of argument not always legitimate, and yet in the use of which you have yourself set me an example. In 1908 you published a book entitled "Joseph Smith as Scientist." The book expresses not only your own deliberate judgment, but that of the committee "appointed by the First Presidency to read the manuscript." In this important volume, on page 161, you write as follows:—

"When the historian of future days

shall review the history of the growth of science, and shall judge men by the record that they have left behind them, he will place Joseph Smith as the greatest philosopher of science of the nineteenth century, and possibly of the twentieth."

May I remind you that the man whom you thus describe, when he wished to give the world testimony to the importance and accuracy of a literary production, did not secure eighty witnesses, but eleven! You will remember that Joseph Smith Jr., whom you describe as the greatest scientific philosopher of modern times, relied on eleven witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

Yours Faithfully

F. S. SPALDING.

Dr. Widtsoe's Reply to Rev. Spalding

RT. Rev. F. S. Spalding, D. D.
Salt Lake City.

My dear Dr. Spalding:—

Did not Job say "Oh that mine adversary had written a book?" I fear that this ancient bit of wisdom will come home to some of us who are engaged in the public discussion of the authenticity of the Book of Abraham. Yet, I am really pleased that you found both time and inclination to answer, as you did in yesterday's *Deseret Evening News*, my letter of last January commenting on your book, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*. It seems to prove that you are not faltering in your efforts to satisfy yourself as to the truth or falsity of "Mormonism." May I add that you can not be any more determined than I am to know the truth, the whole truth, of "Mormonism." Let us have the truth!

I have twice read your letter. With regret, for I would not wound your feelings, I am obliged to say that I am still unconvinced that you have proved, even remotely, that the Prophet Joseph Smith erred in his translations of the illustrations printed in the *Pearl of Great Price*.

In fact your letter seems to me to weaken your case exceedingly.

I noted, also regretfully, that your letter while directed to me is really a blanket answer, especially to the comments on your book by *Prest. Joseph F. Smith, Elder B. H. Roberts and Editor J. M. Sjodahl*. These men have certainly made forceful objections to your conclusion, but mine are very real to me, and I should have been pleased had you replied to them one by one.

In your book you state with a number of reasons that "If the Book of Mormon is true, it is, next to the Bible, the most important book in the world." The importance of the inquiry is nowhere minimized by you. Moreover, in your dedication "To my many Mormon friends, who are as honest searchers after the truth as he hopes he is himself—this book is dedicated by the Author" you certainly imply that this tremendously important inquiry which may double the written foundations of the Christian faith is to be conducted in the fullest spirit of strict truth. In no other manner could it be pursued by an honest man.

By your own words concerning the great importance and the spirit of the inquiry, nothing short of a scientific, i. e., a truly systematic and exhaustive, investigation could be tolerated. Whether Joseph Smith was in error is, according to your own reasoning, of little import in comparison with the great gift to Christianity could the Book of Mormon be shown to be true. In your letter you reiterate this thought, for by the accuracy of the prophet's translation of the hieroglyphics you would try the Prophet, the Book of Mormon, the whole system of "Mormon" belief and the successors in office of the Prophet, including the present president of the Church. Surely, a sane person was justified in expecting a scientific, i. e., a systematic and exhaustive, examination of this subject which you had chosen to explain to the world.

I was amazed, therefore, to read in your letter, your vigorous refusal to have your book classed as scientific and your denial of any intent to con-

*From *The Deseret News*, March 8, 1913.

duct such an inquiry. May I ask then, with all respect, in what class does your book belong and what was really your intent? This inquiry you claim to be of transcendent importance to the world. If you were sincere in this, and I shall not question it, you certainly would not be ready to pronounce final judgment on the basis of eight or eleven letters written in answer to, only Heaven knows, what questions you propounded. I am half annoyed to think that you would ask your "Mormon" friends to give attention to an inquiry so superficially conducted. Meanwhile I am gratified that you agree with the charge I made that the argument was not scientific.

You cannot mean it. If you intended only to place on permanent record the eight letters in your possession, you have no argument. Some one else must continue the work that you have only hinted at. You claim that you are incompetent for want of special learning to make an inquiry, such as I suggested. If so, you should not have undertaken it. But I know, as do all your friends, that your long years of training and your lifelong scholarly habits make you eminently able to pursue such an inquiry to the end, though it may require many years. Are you dodging the demand that you make this inquiry an honest search after truth? If so, you will tempt your friends to believe you insincere. You have undertaken the work, and have asked us to accept certain conclusions. You must now round up the investigation and make the conclusions convincing.

When I commented on your book you will recall that I took no issue with the Egyptologists. I did question the method of the investigation, and claimed that your work was incomplete and your conclusion unwarranted for the following reasons (the evening was too short to enumerate several others):

1. That you secured the opinions of only eight scholars in the somewhat inexact field of Egyptology when many more were available.
2. That there was evidence of an unscientific haste to get into print.
3. That you accepted without question the authority of your small jury.
4. That you ignored the evident differences in the opinions of the members of the jury.
5. That you failed to make minute comparisons of the figures and script in the hieroglyphics in the Pearl of Great Price with similar figures and script in the museums of the world.
6. That you virtually denied the symbolical meaning of all Egyptian funeral inscriptions.
7. That you refrained from mention-

ing the striking similarities between Joseph Smith's translation and your eight opinions.

8. That you disregarded the possible internal evidences of the Book of Abraham in support of the Prophet's translation.

9. That you were silent on the whole vital matter of Egypt and Abraham.

10. That you, probably unintentionally, prejudiced your witnesses.

11. That your eight letters are not even remotely studies of the matter under investigation.

12. That you accepted at their face value letters that are clearly prejudiced and ill-tempered.

I submit these reasons to you again, for, as I view it, they completely vitiate your argument. You must give the subject a thoroughly scientific examination before you can expect a fully respectful hearing. You can not ask every reader, as you suggest in your letter, to do this work for himself. You have publicly chosen to do the labor, you must in justice to yourself and in fairness to the readers, complete it. Meanwhile, I am very glad to notice that, in your letter you make answer to charges 1 and 4 as above stated. I hope you will give the others your early attention.

Dr. Mercer's attempt to harmonize the apparent differences among the jury is very fair, and so far as it goes, very satisfactory. I shall not allow myself to be drawn into any discussion of the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphics, which you have agreed to make clear to us.

As a layman, though an educated and, I hope, an intelligent layman, who has spent the larger part of his life in research in another difficult department of science, I am not impressed that your conclusion has received material support from the letters of Drs. Mercer, Barton and Peters. These scholars agree in giving you a mechanical and somewhat antiquated interpretation of a small part of plates 1 and 3. They frankly admit that they can do little or nothing with plate 2. Your scholars do not attempt to explain the plates, that is, to exhibit their symbolism and their probable historical derivation so that they may be used to test the translation which the prophet made of them as emphasized in the Book of Abraham. If, for argument's sake, we say that your scholars agree and are correct in their interpretation of the figures in plates 1 and 2, it would not be difficult to reconcile their version with that of the prophet.

Suppose a photograph of Woodrow Wilson's inauguration should be handed down to posterity. Four or five thousand years hence the picture might be interpreted to be a scene of the in-

auguration of a president of the United States in the twentieth century, as four scholars have interpreted the plates of the Book of Abraham; or, as a scene of a particular president, Woodrow Wilson, as the prophet did in the notations to the hieroglyphics; or, the scene could be used as the basis of a discussion of the government, conditions, education, history and ideals of a great and magnificent nation—the method used by the prophet in the text of the Book of Abraham. All three interpretations would be correct, but the first would be easy, mechanical and unsatisfactory. I repeat that something more must be done than to label a few of the figures Osiris, Isis or Anubis before Joseph Smith can be placed in “the same class of fakers as Dr. Cook.” You, yourself must do something more than to collect letters in this controversy. The real results of men’s scholarship are found in their written books, scientific papers and formal addresses. The method that you have pursued in this inquiry is dangerously like that employed by Dr. Cook in his “discovery” of the north pole.

Were it worth while I might propound an endless list of questions. For instance: Did you observe that Dr. Mercer and Dr. Barton, the witnesses for the witnesses, do not agree? To one the meaning of the figures is absolute; to the other it varies with the historical period.

How can it be that from Mr. Deveria to Dr. Barton, some imply that they are able to read the hieroglyphics easily; others only with difficulty, and some not at all? As a layman my distrust is awakened. Can it be possible that this learned jury has not sat down with magnifying glasses and dictionaries to work out as much as possible of the “badly” copied hieroglyphics, upon the safe interpretation of which so much of good for Christianity rests? Is it possible these men of science are dealing lightly with this mighty subject?

Why is such Egyptian darkness hovering over the translation of Plate 2? Is it probable that Egyptologists can not read it? Some have so stated. If one set of figures can not be read, may it be suggested that others may as yet be poorly understood? Who says or has said that Abraham wrote the Book of Abraham in Egyptian? Abraham wrote the book, but in what language I think none knows. Even in his day scribes and linguists no doubt existed. Besides Abraham might have known more than one language. Some very ordinary people of today know three or four. Do you not think this inquiry would prosper more if your prejudiced jury could be induced to read the Book of Abraham carefully and really learn to

understand its message? Would it be possible to find a scholar who could pass a scholarly opinion on this subject without taking ailing at “Mormonism” of which it is evident your jurymen know nothing? Frankly, I am heartily ashamed for the sake of scholarship, of some of the letters that you have published. If the authors write books and teach classes in the same spirit, scholarship will soon be held in contempt. Don’t you think that the spirit of the whole inquiry is summed up by Dr. Mercer when he says, “It is complained that scholars did not interpret all the figures of these fac-similes and comment upon all of Smith’s interpretations,—they probably feel as I did, that their time was too valuable to spend on such scientific work as that of Joseph Smith’s guesses.” In my letter to you, I said that such was the feeling of your jurymen. And that is your honest search after the truth of a matter second in importance to the Bible! To the acceptance of such an inquiry you have invited your “Mormon” friends!

But why continue the guessing? When Egyptologists will respectfully and thoroughly examine the plates in the Pearl of Great Price and render their translations of figures and script, as best they can, even that “badly copied,” and in full light of the religion of ancient Egypt, it will be time to deal with their findings seriously. This has not yet been done.

You have done me the honor to send a copy of my letter to Dr. Mercer. I, too, have respect for any Harvard man, especially for one who has attained the scholarship of Dr. Mercer. I know the Harvard training well enough to tell you if you will call on Dr. Mercer in person and ask for the full truth, he will tell you as I have told you, that your research under the heading Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator is thoroughly unscientific. The spirit of the Jesuit Kirsher, several times referred to by the jury of Egyptologists, occasionally enters into the best of us even in this late and enlightened day.

The loose spirit of your methods of inquiry is well shown in your summary disposition of my first charge, that you secured the opinions of only eight scholars in the somewhat inexact field of Egyptology, when many more were available. To this you simply answer that eleven men of Egyptian learning have labeled approximately alike, the main figures in Plates 1 and 2; eleven witnesses, only, testified publicly to having seen and handled the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated—hence, your jury is large enough. Certainly, it is an unexpected tribute that you pay to the authority of Joseph Smith. I should be interested to know just

how far you are willing to submit to the example of the "Mormon" prophet.

The witnesses to the Book of Mormon testify that they saw and handled the golden plates. Your jury testify to the accepted inferences concerning matters submerged in the twilight of antiquity, into which new light is daily being thrown, often to the destruction of former inferences. Assuming, if you will permit me, that the two sets of men are equally honest, which evidence possesses the higher degree of credibility? Eleven men could scarcely disagree on the big fact that they saw and handled a series of metallic plates covered with inscriptions, though they might vitally disagree on the minor matters of the exact size of the plates, the nature of the inscriptions or the quality of the metal. On the other hand, eleven or eleven hundred men might disagree fundamentally on inferences concerning things and conditions of the past which never may be known directly by the present—unless indeed they slavishly follow some high authority, to which they should be subjected for examination. The only big agreement among your jury is with respect to the general meaning of Plates 1 and 2 and the use of Plate 3—and this agreement is not based on tangible facts like the handling of material things or the connected logical steps of thought that lead to certainty.

Much as I dislike to disagree with you, I must insist that eleven witnesses, especially since they admit their examination is cursory, and are unwilling to make it extensive, are not sufficient to settle this question that roots in the uncertain past. I will predict that if your jury be enlarged, freed from prejudice and asked to go into the whole question of figures, script and names, in the light of the Book of Abraham, you will be greatly surprised. If such a thorough-examination should point to the correctness of Joseph Smith's work, would you be as willing to enter the "Mormon" Church as you suggest I should be to leave it should the examination turn against the prophet's correctness?

Moreover, the use you make of your eleven testimonies is vastly different from that made by the Prophet or the Church, of the eleven testimonies for the Book of Mormon. You rest your whole case on your eleven lightly written reports. No more can be said. Your childlike reverence of pointed authority is sublime! I envy you; for life has fastened upon me the habit of analyzing, for myself, every vital matter, irrespective of the authority from which it proceeds.

To the "Mormon" the testimonies of the eleven witnesses are important but

only partial evidences of the genuineness of the Book of Mormon. In fact, in "Mormon" literature you will find a whole host of other evidences, held of equal value with the testimonies of the witnesses. The book itself gives the supreme test. Have you read it? Have you tried it? It can do no harm:

"And 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." (Book of Mormon, Moroni: 10: 4).

I received and read your book on "Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator" with the love of truth in my heart. After giving the matter considerable thought I wrote you as I had promised, my candid opinion of it, and pointed out the great flaw which to my mind invalidated your conclusion—that of careless superficiality. I specified 12 reasons, as above summarized, for my view, and 12 others are waiting to be presented when the first lot have been disposed of. In reply you ignore 10 of my reasons by insisting that your book is not and does not pretend to be a thoroughgoing search after truth. You again present letters from three scholars—how you must revel and riot in the effulgence of letter writing authorities—to support your contention that the jury of Egyptologists is fully agreed. You have added very little to your contention. You then proceed to meet my criticism that your jury, in view of the great importance of the subject and the uncertain and growing field of Egyptology, should have been larger, by saying that there are 11 men in your jury and only 11 witnesses to the Book of Mormon, and all that in face of the common knowledge that although the Book of Mormon witnesses actually saw and handled the plates, their testimonies are only one of many in establishing the truth of the Book of Mormon, whereas you base everything upon your 11 unwilling or prejudiced witnesses. You have chosen the wrong comparison, and my first charge stands intact.

Your work has only been begun. You must either admit defeat or you must carry it on to the end. If you leave it where it is now, the historian of the Mormon controversy, on whatever side, cannot place you high.

As I wrote before, let me write now. I have no fear of the outcome when Joseph Smith the Prophet is subjected to any fair examination, but the inquiry must be an honest search after truth.

Sincerely,

JOHN A. WIDTSOE.