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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** Sidney B. Sperry: The Man, Scholar, and Teacher

**Author(s)**

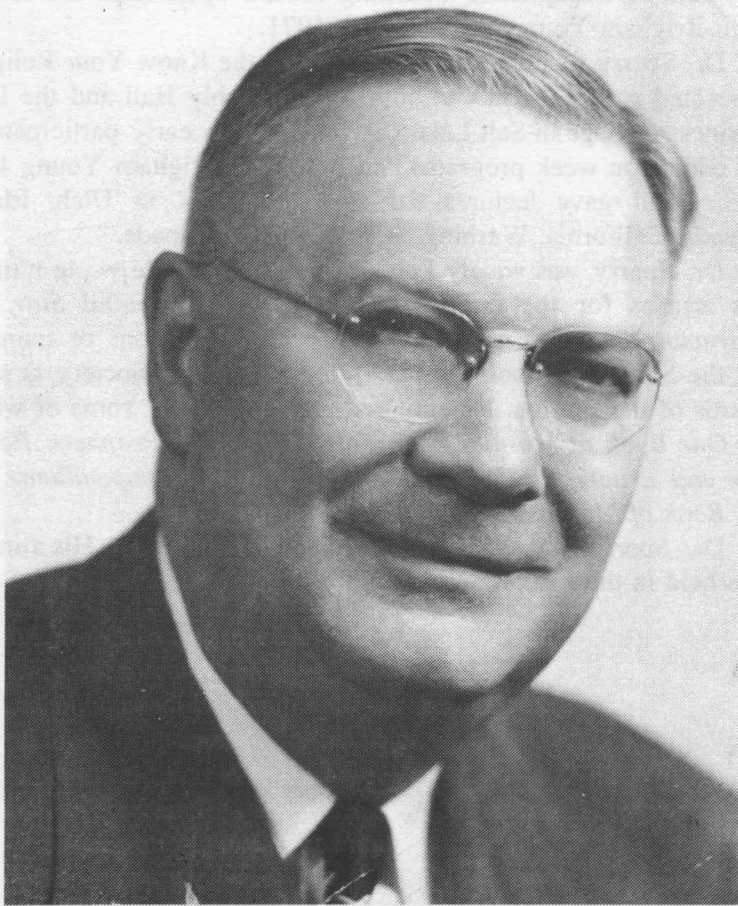
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**Abstract** Personal reminiscences about Sidney B. Sperry.

From 1952 to 1954, Dr. Sperry was director of the Division of Religion at Brigham Young University, and from 1954 to 1959 he was director of Graduate Studies in Religion.

In May 1957, Brigham Young University bestowed the Karl G. Llewellyn Postgraduate Teaching Award upon him. He received



the Karl G. Llewellyn Postgraduate Teaching Award upon him. He received the award for his outstanding teaching in the Department of Religion at Brigham Young University. He was also a member of the LDS Church and the LDS Temple in Salt Lake City, Utah. He was a member of the Board of Trustees of the LDS Church and the Board of Trustees of the LDS Church in Salt Lake City, Utah. He was a member of the Board of Trustees of the LDS Church and the Board of Trustees of the LDS Church in Salt Lake City, Utah.

## Sidney B. Sperry: The Man, Scholar, and Teacher

In a world where it was fashionable to deny the literalness of the Bible and revelation, Brother Sperry, almost alone, played a crucial role in defending the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and other revelations given to Joseph Smith. (Hugh Nibley)

Ellis Rasmussen reports that while Sidney Sperry was still a student at LDS High School in Salt Lake, he heard of Bishop Franklin S. Spalding's attempt to discredit the book of Abraham, and he then made a mental note that he might someday undertake to defend the latter-day scriptures he saw under attack. In a KBYU-FM radio program in December 1967 Brother Sperry described how he had earlier come across the grammar and alphabet for the book of Abraham, which he was able to use as a basis for his defense of the scriptures. Although he could have found fame through his writing in professional journals (the 1959 printing of the Brown, Driver, and Briggs *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* acknowledges Brother Sperry's contributions to its accuracy), he chose to devote his knowledge of biblical languages, archaeology, and history to helping the Latter-

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Editor's note: We appreciate the kindness of the people mentioned here in letting us summarize and publish their personal reminiscences of Sidney Sperry; see Ellis T. Rasmussen, "Sidney B. Sperry: Student of the Book of Mormon," *Ensign* 6 (July 1986): 24-27; Russel B. Swensen, "Mormons at the University of Chicago Divinity School," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7/2 (Summer 1972): 37-47; and David Yarn, "Sidney B. Sperry," in *They Gladly Taught: Ten BYU Professors*, ed. Jean Anne Waterstradt (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University and the Emeritus Club, 1986), 159-65.

day Saints. Paramount in his study of the scriptures are his exploration and explanation of the Book of Mormon.

Brother Sperry's journey to this level of scholarship was marked by a milestone at the University of Chicago. Russel Swensen notes that in 1925 Sperry left his small family to obtain a master's degree in Old Testament languages and literature, which he received a year later. In 1931 he became the first Latter-day Saint scholar to obtain a doctorate in divinity school education, with his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Brother Swensen remarks that Brother Sperry was a highly effective and popular teacher and a prolific author of many scholarly books, Church manuals, and articles dealing with biblical and modern scriptural studies.

In 1932 Brother Sperry began teaching at Brigham Young University. It was here that Robert Patch began his association with him. Visiting Utah for the centennial celebrations in 1947, Brother Patch was walking by Brother Sperry's office when he was invited in to visit, whereupon Brother Sperry hired him on the spot, about the same time that he hired Reid Bankhead and Calvin Bartholomew. For the better part of three years, Brother Sperry was their Hebrew teacher. Brother Patch recalls that Brother Sperry was a major influence in their study of the scriptures. One colleague asked him if he believed in what he was writing, and he answered, "Categorically affirmative." On a personal note, Brother Patch fondly remembers Brother Sperry calling the members of the Patch family on their birthdays to wish them a happy birthday. He also recalls the solicitous way he treated Sister Sperry in her last few years of failing health. Brother Patch ranks Brother Sperry along with George Reynolds and Hugh Nibley as the foremost Book of Mormon scholars of their time.

Keith Meservy met Brother Sperry a year later, in 1948, upon returning from his mission. He recalls that when he needed a class in biblical Aramaic, Brother Sperry willingly agreed to teach him one on one, since there were no other students. He remembers that Brother Sperry was an organist for the Provo Fourth Ward (having been one of the last students of John J. McClellan, organist at the Salt Lake Tabernacle) and that he had been a boxer in his younger days. Brother Meservy tells an interesting story about a race sponsored in Provo for a course from Provo to Manti via

Nephi and back. The object of the race was to use the least amount of gas, and Brother Sperry in his Volkswagen won this race at least twice.

Brother Meservy has a favorite anecdote concerning Brother Sperry's writing habits. He reports, "One day when I went into his office to see him, I found him working on one of his books. He had a pile of papers neatly stacked on the right side of his desk. Each sheet was written in long hand. When I learned that this was the manuscript of his next book, I looked in amazement at the unruffled stack of papers lying there. (In those precomputer days, I not only typed out whatever I wrote, but also double-spaced it to make sure I had enough room to make corrections. Handwriting anything, knowing that it would all have to be rewritten, was too laborious and time consuming a way to write to my way of thinking. The thought of writing a whole book by this process amazed me.) When I made an observation to this effect, he chuckled and noted that a friend of his had recognized his lifelong disposition to write well-composed paragraphs by nicknaming him 'One-Write Sperry.' "

David Yarn, in the book *They Gladly Taught*, highlights Brother Sperry's championing Brigham Young University as a center for scriptural study. As he worked to recruit and keep qualified scholars in religion, Brother Sperry never hesitated to ask President Howard S. McDonald or President Ernest L. Wilkinson for better salaries for those with whom he was building the program. He was not known, however, to ask more for himself. Brother Yarn also comments on Brother Sperry's war contribution, noting that he taught mathematics and Morse code on campus to young men in the reserve officer training program. He remembers that Brother Sperry's son Lyman identified him as the first person in Utah to make contact by wireless with ships in the Pacific, and that, in the early war years, Brother Sperry drove a truck at Geneva Steel while the plant was being constructed. Brother Sperry was a pioneer of the Brigham Young University Study Abroad program in the Holy Land, leading the first BYU-sponsored trip to Jerusalem. Though his interest and abilities in archaeology are sometimes overlooked when compared with his teaching and writing accomplishments, he and four others were

responsible for the establishment of Brigham Young University's Department of Archaeology in 1946.

Brother A. Burt Horsley recalls that he first came to know Sidney Sperry when he came to Brigham Young as a student in the fall of 1940 and was very impressed with his first class from him on doctrines of the Church. His graphic use of drawings, analogies, and word forms helped enormously in grasping the meaning of what he taught. Brother Horsley's personal testimony was greatly strengthened by the way Brother Sperry dealt with the "Deutero-Isaiah" problem with the help of the Book of Mormon.

Brother Horsley remembers that Brother Sperry enjoyed boat fishing; although his weekdays were full of school work, he could usually squeeze in a few hours at the lake on weekends. He especially enjoyed going with one of the General Authorities.

As with Brother Sperry's many friends and colleagues, Brother Horsely missed him when he retired. His passing in 1977 imposed a great loss on many friends and admirers.