



2011

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Roper, Matthew and Fields, Paul J. (2011) "The Historical Case against Sidney Rigdon's Authorship of the Book of Mormon," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 23: No. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol23/iss1/9>

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The Historical Case against Sidney Rigdon's Authorship of the Book of Mormon

Review of Matthew L. Jockers, Daniela M. Witten, and Craig S. Criddle. "Reassessing authorship of the Book of Mormon using delta and nearest shrunken centroid classification." Literary and Linguistic Computing 23/4 (2008): 465-91.

MATTHEW ROPER AND PAUL J. FIELDS

The effort by Jockers, Witten, and Criddle¹ to support the Spalding-Rigdon hypothesis of Book of Mormon authorship using stylometric analysis collapses under numerous methodological flaws, as demonstrated in the immediately preceding essay.² The aim of this review is to evaluate Criddle and associates' study from a historical perspective since much of their approach depends on assumptions and interpretations of relevant historical data.

In a separate review of Jockers's unpublished effort to justify some of his methodological lapses,³

it was shown that even a statistical analysis can be thrown off course by wishful thinking, special pleading, and the investigator's refusal to set aside his or her biases, beliefs, and preferences. With researchers like Criddle and associates so committed to achieving their desired outcome, the more malleable materials of historiography provide a welcome respite from the rigors of mathematics. Here one's desires, biases, and preconceptions can be given full rein.

It is telling and troubling that Criddle and associates appeal to "historical scholarship" that supports "a central role for Rigdon . . . [and] a now-missing Spalding manuscript" (p. 482). Few historians—whether friendly or hostile to the truth claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—believe that the historical data support the Spalding manuscript hypothesis. This is a crucial point since a stylometric analysis has no meaning unless there is a priori justification for considering a proposed author as a viable

1. Hereafter referred to as Criddle and associates.
 2. See, in this issue of the *Review*, Paul J. Fields, G. Bruce Schaalje, and Matthew Roper, "Examining a Misapplication of Nearest Shrunken Centroid Classification to Investigate Book of Mormon Authorship." Also, for an overview of the Spalding theory, see Matthew Roper, "The Mythical 'Manuscript Found,'" *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 7-140; and Roper, "Myth, Memory, and 'Manuscript Found,'" *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 179-223.
 3. See "Appendix: Exposing a Methodological Lapse," herein at the end of Fields, Schaalje, and Roper, "Examining a Misapplication of Nearest Shrunken Centroid Classification."
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candidate. Without supporting historical and biographical evidence, the results of the analysis are nothing more than a mathematical exercise and cannot constitute a persuasive argument for authorship attribution.

We will first review several historical claims relating to the Spalding-Rigdon theory, including the historically problematic claims that Rigdon had a knowledge of the Book of Mormon and of Spalding's writings previous to his conversion to Mormonism in late 1830. We will also explore some of the implications of Rigdon's beliefs, practices, and known writings in connection with the Book of Mormon, as well as the claim that Rigdon met Joseph Smith before December 1830. We will next discuss Criddle and associates' use of problematic historical sources and evidence relating to the dictation of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon and the implications it raises for the Spalding-Rigdon theory. We will show that this evidence is inconsistent with the theory that Rigdon wrote the Book of Mormon or that he could have been responsible for its production.

Sidney Rigdon and the Book of Mormon

Sidney Rigdon's introduction to the Book of Mormon and his public conversion to Mormonism long after the book's publication pose obvious challenges for proponents of the Spalding-Rigdon theory. In October 1830, Oliver Cowdery accompanied Parley P. Pratt, Ziba Peterson, and Peter Whitmer on a mission to Missouri, intending to preach to the Lamanites (Doctrine and Covenants 28:14; 32). While passing through northern Ohio, these missionaries stopped in Mentor, where they introduced Sidney Rigdon to the Book of Mormon. Rigdon, although initially resistant, eventually accepted the Book of Mormon and was baptized. Those

who witnessed the reformist preacher's first encounter with early missionaries indicate that Rigdon at first had some difficulty accepting the book. In his own recollection of these events, Rigdon himself said he initially "felt very much prejudiced at the assertion" that the Book of Mormon was a revelation from God.⁴ Pratt said that Rigdon "was much surprised, and it was with much persuasion and argument, that he was prevailed on to read it, and after he had read it, he had a great struggle of mind, before he fully believed and embraced it."⁵ Rigdon's daughter Nancy Rigdon Ellis was eight years old at the time of these events. In an interview with E. L. and W. H. Kelley in 1884, she said she remembered the event "because of the contest which soon arose between her father and Pratt and Cowdery, over the Book of Mormon." She stated: "I saw them hand him the book, and I am as positive as can be that he never saw it before. He read it and examined it for about an hour and then threw it down, and said he did not believe a word in it."⁶ Rigdon must have known that acceptance of the Book of Mormon would mean losing both the home recently built by his Mentor congregation and the support of many who had been his followers, friends, and religious associates for years. The life adjustment necessitated by his conversion seems to have been a difficult trial for the proud man.

Rigdon's initial response to the book as remembered by friends and family is consistent with his claim that he was not responsible for its origin or involved in its coming forth. That conclusion

4. "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons*, 15 August 1843, 289–90.

5. Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled*. . . (New York: O. Pratt and E. Fordham, 1838), 41.

6. Nancy Rigdon Ellis, interview with E. L. Kelley and W. H. Kelley, 14 May 1884, in *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1967), 4:451–52.

is further strengthened by evidence that some of Rigdon's previous practices and beliefs as a reformist preacher conflicted with those he encountered in the Book of Mormon. Reuben Harmon, a resident of Kirtland at this time, recalled hearing Rigdon preach a sermon following his acceptance of the Book of Mormon. "He said he had been preaching wrong doctrine, and asked their forgiveness. He said he should address them no more in public. He wept freely through his sermon."⁷ Harmon also stated: "I heard Sidney Rigdon [give] the last speech that he made while he officiated as a Disciple preacher. He said he had been mistaken all his life-time, and he quit preaching and went into Mr. Morley's field and went to plowing. . . . He did not go to preaching right away after he left the Disciple church. I heard him make the remark that he never expected to speak in public again."⁸ Following his own baptism and ordination, he would in fact preach again, but Harmon's recollection suggests that the transition from Disciple to Latter-day Saint was not an easy one and that there were significant elements of the Book of Mormon that conflicted with Rigdon's previous religious practices and beliefs. One significant area likely had to do with the issue of divine authority.

Sidney Rigdon, like Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott, had baptized followers but did not claim divine authority for this practice beyond biblical precedent. This apparent rejection of the need for a divine restoration of authority to

perform ordinances such as baptism was troubling to those who were initially sympathetic to Campbellite teachings but who later believed the Book of Mormon and joined the Saints. Eliza R. Snow described her earlier associations with the Campbellites: "During my brief attachment to that church I was deeply interested in the study of the ancient Prophets, in which I was assisted by the erudite A. Campbell, Walter Scott whose acquaintance I made, but more particularly (by) Sidney Rigdon who was a frequent visitor at my father's house." Like many other Christians who were seeking a restoration, Snow had sought to understand the biblical prophecies concerning the latter days and the millennium and looked for a return to original Christian teachings among these Campbellite teachers, but she found that something was still lacking: "Some told me one thing and some another; but there was no Peter, 'endowed from on high.' I heard Alexander Campbell advocate the literal meaning of the Scriptures—listened to him with deep interest—hoped his new life led to a fulness—was baptized, and soon learned that, as well they might, he and his followers disclaimed all authority, and my baptism was of no consequence."⁹ This absence of divine authority was apparent to others as well. John Murdock had been attracted to the teachings of Campbell and Rigdon, but he said that he eventually became disillusioned by Campbell's rejection of modern spiritual gifts. Murdock asked, "Where is the man to commence the work of baptizing? or where shall he get his authority? Can he go to those who are out of the way and obtain authority? . . . The only way the authority can be obtained is, the Lord

7. Reuben P. Harmon statement, quoted in *Naked Truths about Mormonism* 1/2 (April 1888): 1.

8. Reuben P. Harmon interview, 8 March 1884, in *Public Discussion of the Issues Between the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Church of Christ [Disciples], Held in Kirtland, Ohio, Beginning February 12, and Closing March 8, 1884* . . . (Lamoni, IA: Herald Publishing House, 1913), 392.

9. Eliza R. Snow, "Sketch of My Life," in *Eliza R. Snow, an Immortal: Selected Writings of Eliza R. Snow* (Salt Lake City: Nicolas G. Morgan Sr. Foundation, 1957), 5.

must either send an angel to baptize the first man, or he must give a special command to someone to baptize another.”¹⁰ Parley P. Pratt wrote of his religious searching prior to encountering Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon:

About this time one Mr. Sidney Rigdon came into the neighborhood as a preacher, and it was rumored that he was a kind of Reformed Baptist, who, with Mr. Alexander Campbell, of Virginia, a Mr. Scott, and some other gifted men, had dissented from the regular Baptists, from whom they differed much in doctrine. At length I went to hear him, and what was my astonishment when I found he preached faith in Jesus Christ, repentance towards God, and baptism for remission of sins, with the promise of the gift of the Holy Ghost to all who would come forward, with all their hearts, and obey this doctrine! Here was the *ancient gospel* in due form. Here were the very principles which I had discovered years before; but could find no one to minister in. But still **one great link was wanting** to complete the chain of the ancient order of things; and that was, **the authority to minister in holy things—the apostleship, the power which should accompany the form**. This thought occurred to me as soon as I heard Mr. Rigdon make proclamation of the gospel.

Peter proclaimed this gospel, and baptized for remission of sins, and promised the gift of the Holy Ghost, because he was commissioned so to do by a crucified and risen

Saviour. But who is Mr. Rigdon? Who is Mr. Campbell? Who commissioned them? Who baptized them for remission of sins? Who ordained them to stand up as Peter? Of course they were baptized by the Baptists, and ordained by them, and yet they had now left them because they did not administer the true gospel. And it was plain that the Baptists could not claim the apostolic office by succession, in a regular, unbroken chain from the Apostles of old, preserving the gospel in its purity, and the ordinances unchanged, from the very fact that they were now living in the perversion of some, and the entire neglect of others of these ordinances; this being the very ground of difference between the old Baptists and these Reformers. Again, these Reformers claimed no new commission by revelation, or vision from the Lord, while they had not the least shadow of claim by succession. It might be said, then, with propriety: “Peter I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?” However, we were thankful for even the forms of truth, as none could claim the power, and authority, and gifts of the Holy Ghost—at least so far as we knew.¹¹

These comments highlight an important distinction between the pre-Mormon beliefs of Sidney Rigdon and those found in the Book of Mormon. Rigdon and other Reformers believed that the Bible provided sufficient warrant to baptize, while the Book of Mormon teaches that baptism and other sacred ordinances in the church can only be done by divine authority bestowed by God or his duly authorized representatives. This

10. John Murdock, “An Abridged Record of the Life of John Murdock, taken from his journal by himself,” John Murdock Journal, typescript, BYU Archives, 4–10.

11. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 13–14.

is illustrated by the account of King Limhi's people, who believed in the words of Alma but lacked an authorized representative who could baptize them: "And it came to pass that king Limhi and many of his people were desirous to be baptized; but there was none in the land that had authority from God. And Ammon declined from doing this thing, considering himself an unworthy servant" (Mosiah 21:33). Limhi's people could not be baptized without authority from God, yet such a lack of divine authority would not have stopped Reformers like Campbell, Scott, or Rigdon from administering baptism. The twelve Nephite disciples received authority to baptize directly from the resurrected Jesus and not from earlier scripture or the community of believers (3 Nephi 11:21-26; 12:1). The specific granting of divine authority to mortals is a recurrent element in the resurrected Lord's ministry at the Book of Mormon's climax (3 Nephi 18:5, 36-37; 20:4; 4 Nephi 1:5). If Rigdon were the author of the Book of Mormon and he hoped to form a new church, why would he contradict what the Book of Mormon teaches about baptizing without divine authority?

Rigdon denied any connection with the origin of the Book of Mormon. Several residents near New Portage, Medina County, Ohio, remembered a discourse by Rigdon that appears to have been given at the high point of the anti-Mormon excitement associated with Philastus Hurlbut's 1834 activities. Phineas, Hiel, and Mary D. Bronson recalled:

In the spring of 1833 or 1834, at the house of Samuel Baker, near New Portage, Medina county, Ohio, we, whose signatures are affixed, did hear Elder Sidney Rigdon, in the presence of a large congregation, say he had been informed that some in the neighborhood had accused him of being the

instigator of the Book of Mormon. Standing in the door-way, there being many standing in the door-yard, he, holding up the Book of Mormon, said, "I testify in the presence of this congregation, and before God and all the Holy Angels up yonder, (pointing towards heaven), before whom I expect to give account at the judgment day, that I never saw a sentence of the Book of Mormon, I never penned a sentence of the Book of Mormon, I never knew that there was such a book in existence as the Book of Mormon, until it was presented to me by Parley P. Pratt, in the form that it now is."¹²

Rigdon condemned E. D. Howe's book, the first to propose the Spalding theory, as a "book of falsehoods."¹³ Just before leaving Kirtland for Missouri, Rigdon testified that he had nothing to do with the origin of the Book of Mormon. Reuben Harmon recalled that "Sidney Rigdon at the time he made his last speech here, said that he knew nothing about the Book of Mormon until it was presented to him by Oliver Cowdery and Parley Pratt. I never heard of the Spaulding story until it was sprung on me."¹⁴ In 1839 Rigdon stated that he had never heard of Spalding or his manuscript until the theory had been advanced by Philastus Hurlbut some five years earlier. In a letter to the

12. Statement by Phineas Bronson, Hiel Bronson, and Mary D. Bronson, quoted in Rudolph Etzenhouser, *From Palmyra, New York, 1830, to Independence, Missouri, 1894* (Independence, MO: Ensign Publishing House, 1894), 388. An 1834 date would make sense in the context of the Hurlbut anti-Mormon excitement leading up to the apostate's trial in April of that year. If this were the spring of 1833, Rigdon would not have been responding to Hurlbut, who was still a member of the church until June of that year, but may have been responding to earlier claims circulating since early 1831 that he was responsible for the Book of Mormon.

13. Sidney Rigdon to Oliver Cowdery, April 1836, *Latter-day Saint Messenger and Advocate*, April 1836, 299.

14. Reuben P. Harmon statement, 10 June 1884, in *Public Discussion of the Issues . . .*, 393.

Quincy Whig in response to a recent article asserting his connection with Spalding, Rigdon dismissed the claim as a “moonshine story” and said that he was “entirely indebted to this production” for the “knowledge of [Spalding’s] earthly existence, . . . for surely until Doctor Philastus Hulburt [*sic*] informed me that such a being lived, at some former period, I had not the most distant knowledge of his existence.”¹⁵ Between 1831 and 1844, Rigdon was a prominent leader in the church, but he became alienated from Joseph Smith after the troubles in Missouri. Following Joseph Smith’s death in 1844, Rigdon unsuccessfully sought appointment as the Prophet’s successor, refused to follow the apostolic leadership, and for a time led a small group of dissenters. After his excommunication, Rigdon expressed bitterness toward Joseph Smith, claiming he was a fallen prophet and denouncing the practice of plural marriage and the leadership of the Twelve. He continued until his death in 1876, however, to maintain that he had nothing to do with the origin of the Book of Mormon.

According to the Spalding-Rigdon theory, Sidney Rigdon spent years of time, deception, and effort forging a lengthy work of fiction in the hopes of using that book as a tool to found a religious scheme. If so, then it is strange that he rarely used it. Rigdon’s published writings between 1830 and 1846 reveal a writer preoccupied with the need for continuing revelation, miracles, gifts, and prophecies of the latter days, the restoration, and the millennium, but not, interestingly enough, with the Book of Mormon. Rigdon traveled with Joseph Smith in late December 1831 and January 1832 on a brief mission in which he publicly spoke on the subject of the Book of

Mormon and defended it.¹⁶ He clearly believed the book to be true and was willing to defend it, but he rarely if ever quoted from it or used the text to defend and support his arguments. When he mentioned the Book of Mormon at all, it was in a general context of decrying critics or denying having had anything to do with its origin. This is particularly noteworthy in contrast to the writings of W. W. Phelps, for example, who seems to have been infatuated with the Book of Mormon, speaking of it and citing it frequently. Rigdon’s relative neglect of the Book of Mormon would be surprising had he been responsible for its production.

Following the death of his daughter Eliza in 1846, Rigdon seems to have become increasingly unstable and erratic in his behavior, leading to increased alienation from former friends and supporters. His interest in religious things, however, appears not to have been dampened. A collection of purported revelations written between 1863 and 1876 provides a window into some of Rigdon’s beliefs and teachings during the last thirteen years of his life. These writings show a man who still believed in the Book of Mormon and had an affinity for certain restorationist and millennialist ideas, yet they also reveal a man who, sadly, had an inflated view of his own importance and who believed that nearly everyone else but him had gone astray. Sometimes the Book of Mormon is mentioned or alluded to, but it is rarely quoted or used to defend Rigdon’s teachings. These writings seem strangely disconnected from the content and style of the Book of Mormon. Instead, they contain material that is extraneous to the Book of Mormon story. One purported revelation, for example, claims that

15. Sidney Rigdon to the editors of the *Quincy Whig*, 27 May 1839, *Quincy Whig*, 8 June 1839. “Doctor” was Hurlbut’s given name.

16. Sidney Rigdon, “To the Public,” *Ohio Star*, 15 December 1831 and 12 January 1832.

the Esquimauxs (Eskimos) are descendants of Joseph the son of Lehi, something about which the Book of Mormon is silent.¹⁷ Also, instead of quoting Book of Mormon prophecies, other Rigdon revelations turn them on their head. The Book of Mormon contains prophecies of the biblical Joseph and, like the Bible, speaks highly of the patriarch; but according to another purported Rigdon revelation, the biblical Joseph was in reality a wicked man who sought power and worldly fame and became lifted up in pride because of the prophecies about his latter-day namesake.¹⁸ The biblical Joseph's prophecy in the Book of Mormon concerning the "spokesman" for the seer is anachronistically applied to Rigdon rather than to Oliver Cowdery.¹⁹ Rigdon's descriptions of the sealed portion of the plates likewise contradict the scriptural text.²⁰ Rigdon's

later religious writings reflect teachings that require contradictory changes, additions, or revisions to the Book of Mormon to make it fit his later self-serving, iconoclastic, and confused ideology. This dynamic seems inconsistent with the claim that Rigdon was the author of the Book of Mormon.

Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith

The Spalding-Rigdon theory posits an early connection not only between Rigdon and the writings of Solomon Spalding but also between Rigdon and Joseph Smith before the Book of Mormon was published. Such a claim is inconsistent with solid historical evidence that Rigdon did not meet Joseph Smith until he traveled from Kirtland, Ohio, to Fayette, New York, in December 1830. Sometime before his return to Ohio, Rigdon also met W. W. Phelps, a newspaper editor who would later join the church. In a letter to E. D. Howe on 15 January 1831, Phelps wrote, "I had ten hours discourse with a man from your state, named Sidney Rigdon, a convert to its doctrines, and he declared it was true, and he knew it by the power of the Holy Ghost, which was again given to man in preparation for the millennium."²¹ "Early in 1831," wrote Parley P. Pratt, who had first introduced the Book of Mormon to Rigdon several months before, "Mr. Rigdon

17. Revelation to Sidney Rigdon, February 1870 (section 58), in *Book of the Revelations of Jesus Christ to the Children of Zion . . .*, Stephen Post Collection, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, MS 1418 Book A, 92-94.

18. Revelation to Sidney Rigdon, October 1868 (section 42), in *Book of the Revelations of Jesus Christ to the Children of Zion . . .*, Book A, 68-70.

19. Revelation to Sidney Rigdon, October 1872 (section 70), in *Book of the Revelations of Jesus Christ to the Children of Zion . . .*, Book A, 110-18. The prophecy in 2 Nephi speaks of a spokesman who was to "write the writing of the fruit of thy loins, unto the fruit of thy loins; and the spokesman of thy loins shall declare it" (2 Nephi 3:18). After the Book of Mormon was published and the church was restored, Rigdon was called to be a spokesman to Joseph Smith in expounding scriptures (D&C 100:9-11; 124:104), but this was a separate calling in connection with receiving Joseph Smith as a revelator that had nothing to do with the prophecy in 2 Nephi 3 concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Rigdon's writing, as noted above, suggests that he seldom wrote about or quoted from the Book of Mormon.

20. Revelation to Sidney Rigdon, October 1868 (section 42), in *Book of the Revelations of Jesus Christ to the Children of Zion . . .*, Book A, 68-70. Rigdon claimed to know the contents of the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon, but Moroni said that these things were not to be revealed: "The things which are sealed shall not be delivered in the day of the wickedness and abominations of the people" (2 Nephi 27:8; see Ether 4:6). This was a condition that in Rigdon's view still clearly prevailed. Rigdon also claimed that the sealed portion was

the history of Zion from the coming forth of the Book of Mormon to the end and recounts the apostasy and corruption of Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ. According to Nephi, "The book shall be sealed; and in the book shall be a revelation from God, from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof" (2 Nephi 27:7), and the words that are sealed "reveal all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof" (v. 10). Rigdon claimed that the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon contained prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and other prophets, but Moroni indicates that what was sealed was a revelation to the brother of Jared, who lived long before these other prophets (Ether 3:22-28; 4:4-7).

21. W. W. Phelps to E. D. Howe, 15 January 1831, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled . . .* (Painesville, OH, 1834), 274.

having been ordained, under our hands, visited elder J. Smith, Jr., in the state of New-York, for the first time; and from that time forth, rumor began to circulate, that he (Rigdon) was the author of the Book of Mormon. The Spaulding story never was dreamed of until several years afterwards.”²² The theory that Rigdon was responsible for the origin of the Book of Mormon did not arise until early 1831, several months after Rigdon had joined the church and only after he had traveled to New York and met Joseph Smith for the first time. The dearth of primary evidence to the contrary has always been a major weakness in the Spaulding-Rigdon theory.

Some Spaulding advocates argue, however, that Sidney Rigdon may have secretly visited Joseph Smith in New York previous to 1830, but this conflicts with the testimony of friends and family of Joseph Smith, who stated that they did not become acquainted with Rigdon until he visited them at Fayette in December 1830.

After living in Harmony, Pennsylvania, Joseph and Emma Smith and Oliver Cowdery moved to Fayette, New York, where they lived with the Whitmer family. It was there that much of the Book of Mormon translation took place, and the Prophet and his family remained there until their move to Ohio in early 1831. As described above, following his 1830 baptism in Ohio, Rigdon visited New York in December 1830, where he was the subject of the revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants 35. In 1879 Emma Smith was asked when she first met Sidney Rigdon. She responded: “I was residing at father Whitmer’s, when I first saw Sidney Rigdon. . . . The Book of Mormon had been translated and published some time before. Parley P. Pratt had united with the Church before I knew Sidney Rigdon, or heard

of him. At the time the Book of Mormon was translated there was no church organized, and Rigdon did not become acquainted with Joseph and me till after the Church was established in 1830. How long after that I do not know but it was some time.”²³ According to Joseph’s brother William Smith, Rigdon “was never at my father’s house to see my brother until after the book was published. If he had wanted to see Joseph at that time and remained very long, he would have had to be in the field rolling logs or carrying brush.”²⁴ Joseph’s younger sister Katherine likewise affirmed:

Prior to the latter part of the year A.D. 1830, there was no person who visited with or was an acquaintance of ~~brother Joseph~~ <or called upon the> said family or any member thereof, to my knowledge, by the name of Sidney Rigdon; nor was such person known to the family or any member thereof to my knowledge, until the last part of the year AD. 1830, or the first part of the year, 1831, and Sometime after the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ by Joseph Smith jr. and Several months after the publication of the Book of Mormon. That I remember the time when Sidney Rigdon came to my father’s place and it was after the removal of my father from Waterloo, N.Y. to Kirtland, Ohio.²⁵

David Whitmer’s testimony is also consistent with that of the Smiths. Whitmer testified that he did not meet Rigdon until after Rigdon joined the church: “Neither Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris or myself ever met Sydney Rigdon

22. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 42.

23. Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:541.

24. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:506.

25. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:520.

until after the Book of Mormon was in print. I know this of my own personal knowledge, being with Joseph Smith, in Seneca County, N[ew] Y[ork], in the winter of 1830, when Sydney Rigdon and Edward Partridge came from Kirtland, Ohio, to see Joseph Smith, and where Rigdon and Partridge saw Joseph Smith for the first time in their lives.”²⁶

Supposition to Bolster the Theory

Criddle and associates suggest that Oliver Cowdery may have been the intermediary between the hypothetical conspirators. Previous to his association with Joseph Smith in 1829, they claim, “Oliver Cowdery worked as a traveling salesman, selling books and pamphlets.” They even suggest that the chiasm in Alma 36 might be explained through the influence of Oliver Cowdery (p. 489).²⁷ The claim that Oliver was a

book and pamphlet peddler in the mid-1820s is not supported by documents from the 1820s but is based on later recollections from two newspaper editors—recollections that, upon examination, seem to confuse a newspaperman named Benjamin Franklin Cowdery with Oliver.²⁸ Criddle and associates also speculate that Parley P. Pratt may have been a go-between as well (p. 480), but there is no historical evidence that Pratt knew Rigdon before 1829 or that Pratt knew Joseph Smith before his conversion in late 1830.²⁹

Doctrine and Covenants, the Book of Abraham, and Joseph Smith’s personal correspondence, which have previously been suggested by some as evidence for Joseph Smith’s knowledge of the form, “supply no statistical evidence either that Joseph knew about chiasmus or that God revealed chiasmus to Joseph without his knowledge.” Other proposed examples failing the test of intentionality include passages from *Green Eggs and Ham*, “Hickory Dickory Dock,” *INFORMIX Guide*, John Taylor’s *Mediation and Atonement*, the *Popul Vuh*, and Strangite texts. Based on their analysis, Edwards and Edwards conclude, “Our admissibility tests establish the intentionality of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon and refute the claim that Joseph’s modern writings demonstrate his awareness of chiasmus. If Joseph Smith was indeed unaware of chiasmus, then its presence in the Book of Mormon stands as evidence of its authenticity” (Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “When Are Chiasms Admissible as Evidence?” *BYU Studies* 49/4 [2010]: 153).

26. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: David Whitmer, 1887), 11. See David Whitmer, interview with Joseph Smith III, 4 April 1882, in Lyndon W. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 89.
27. Criddle and associates reference a 2004 study that found a high statistical probability that the chiasm in Alma 36 was a deliberate one (Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “Does Chiasmus Appear in the Book of Mormon by Chance?” *BYU Studies* 43/2 [2004]: 103–30). Attributing a knowledge of chiasmus to Oliver Cowdery, they cite the work of John W. Welch (“How Much Was Known about Chiasmus in 1829 When the Book of Mormon Was Translated?” *FARMS Review* 15/1 [2003]: 47–80). While chiasmus was not entirely unknown in nineteenth-century literature before 1830 (when the Book of Mormon was published), Welch’s research suggested that it is extremely unlikely that Joseph Smith or his close associates knew about chiasmus before 1830. Some critics have claimed that examples of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon are unintentional. Others, persuaded by evidence of intentionality, have argued that chiasms are also found in Joseph Smith’s personal writings and in the writings of some of his contemporaries. In a more recent study, Edwards and Edwards applied further statistical analysis to the question in an effort to measure the likelihood of such claims. They found strong evidence that the chiasms in Leviticus 24 in the Bible and Alma 36 in the Book of Mormon were intentional and that their respective authors must have had a knowledge of this literary form. Their analysis also indicates that purported examples from the

28. Larry E. Morris, “Oliver Cowdery’s Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism,” *BYU Studies* 39/1 (2000): 120–21.
29. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 12–23. Pratt recounted the events surrounding his conversion in his autobiography. In October 1827 a newly married Parley P. Pratt moved from his home in Canaan, New York, to settle on a farm in northern Ohio, where his wife sometimes taught school. In 1829 Sidney Rigdon began to preach in their neighborhood, and Pratt was impressed with Rigdon’s restorationist ideas. In August 1830, seeking to follow the Savior’s admonition to forsake all to follow Christ, Pratt decided to sell his Ohio farm and return to his former home in New York, where he intended to preach full-time. At Buffalo, New York, Pratt purchased passage to Albany along the Erie Canal with the intention of returning to Canaan. When the boat passed through Rochester, however, he felt impressed to stop there and preach for a while, sending his wife on ahead to their intended home. In a small town near Rochester, while preparing to preach, he heard reports about the Book of Mormon that caught his interest. He obtained a copy of the book. “As I read, the spirit of the Lord was upon me, and I knew and comprehended that the book was true” (p. 20). Hoping to learn more about Joseph Smith, he walked to Manchester, where he met Hyrum Smith, who

Questionable Sources

Criddle and associates give little attention to primary historical sources that contradict their theory and instead lend undeserved credence to historical sources of questionable reliability. For example, they write that, around 1826 or 1827, “Rigdon is reported to have collaborated with ‘two or three different persons’ in adjacent places to create the Book of Mormon” (p. 480). In a footnote on page 489, they state, “In Bainbridge [Ohio], Rigdon reportedly became involved in what appears to be ‘automatic writing’: using a séance-like process to create the Book of Mormon.” The authors’ description seems to suggest that this report is historically credible. In fact, the source is an obscure article published in 1880 in *The New Northwest*, an Oregon paper, and they insist that the article provides “evidence pointing to Bainbridge as the likely location for production of the [hypothetical] 1827 version of the Book of Mormon” (p. 489). The article reported the claims of O. P. Henry, who said that his mother “lived in the family of Sidney Rigdon prior to her marriage in 1827,” more than fifty-three years earlier.

There was in the family what is now called a “writing medium,” also several others in adjacent places, and the Mormon Bible was written by two or three different persons by an automatic power which they believed was inspiration direct from God, the same as produced the original Jewish Bible and Christian New Testament. Mr. H. believes that Sidney Rigdon furnished Joseph Smith with these manuscripts, and that the story of the “hieroglyphics” was a fabrication to make the credulous take

hold of the mystery; that Rigdon, having learned, beyond a doubt, that the so-called dead could communicate to the living, considered himself duly authorized by Jehovah to found a new church, under divine guidance similar to that of Confucius, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Swedenborg, Calvin, Luther or Wesley, all of whom believed in and taught the ministrations of spirits.³⁰

The text of the Book of Mormon, according to this report, was not to be attributed to Solomon Spalding, or even to Sidney Rigdon, but was purportedly dictated by several unnamed individuals: one in the Rigdon family and several others at undisclosed locations. This cohort of multiple unnamed writers in Bainbridge and elsewhere dictated the text through a process that Mr. Henry informs us his mother considered “automatic” writing—the same process, we are helpfully informed, by which the “Jewish Bible and Christian New Testament” were given. Oddly, neither Mr. Henry nor his venerable mother (the former associate of unnamed spirit mediums for whom *he* speaks) has any knowledge of Rigdon’s authorship of the text, but Mr. Henry tells us what he certainly “believes” to be true, and no doubt would like to prove—that Rigdon, wanting to form a new religion, by some means gathered up the now-missing written fruit of these varied and scattered dictations (which were “automatically” produced by unnamed individuals) and somehow conveyed them to Joseph Smith Jr., who eventually published them as the Book of Mormon. For lack of a better term, we may as well call this variant of the automatic writing

accompanied Pratt to Fayette so he could meet Joseph Smith and join the church.

30. “The Mormon Bible,” *The New Northwest* (Portland, OR), 9 September 1880.

explanation the multi-medium theory of Book of Mormon origins.

The writer of this 1880 article, interestingly enough, did not claim that Rigdon himself engaged in automatic writing to produce the Book of Mormon, but that *others* did so. The writer went on to speculate that Rigdon thereafter made such writings available to Joseph Smith. This would make Rigdon a go-between rather than an author himself. Despite its late date, complete lack of any contemporary or confirmatory evidence, its second- or thirdhand nature, and its invocation of unnamed actors, this theory nevertheless seems to undermine rather than support Criddle and associates' case for Rigdon as a Book of Mormon author. Shortly after the appearance of the above article, an editorialist for the *Deseret News* found the attempt to explain away the Book of Mormon as a product of spiritualism a little amusing. "If this new theory," he observed, "should be caught up by preachers and editors, desperate for some plausible pretense to account for the Book of Mormon, they will have to drop forever the hackneyed and thoroughly riddled old fable called the Spalding theory."³¹ Dale Broadhurst, a recent enthusiast of the Spalding-Rigdon theory, does not share that point of view. "Evidently it did not occur to the LDS critics, that Sidney Rigdon's 'automatic writing' might be accounted for by mental illness, more readily than by recourse to the spiritualist 'medium business.'"³² However,

it is not clear that the claim of "mental illness," whatever one means by that term, does any more to explain the Book of Mormon than does automatic writing.³³ And, whatever Rigdon's mental problems, the 1880 account nowhere describes him as an author at all, but merely as a conduit of *others'* work to Joseph Smith. Broadhurst and Criddle's team will have to seek elsewhere for historically credible evidence making Rigdon a Book of Mormon author. And without a historically plausible reason to posit Rigdon as author, a stylistic analysis of his known works with the Book of Mormon is pointless. Stylometry cannot hope to detect Rigdon's role as a courier for anonymous automatic writers.

The Book of Mormon: A Dictated Text

Criddle and associates view Joseph Smith's use of a seer stone with a skeptical eye (p. 487),³⁴

Scientific Study of Religion 38/2 (1999): 288.

31. "A New Theory," *Deseret News*, 22 September 1880.

32. <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NW/miscnw04.htm> (accessed 1 August 2011). Sociologist Rodney Stark, well known for his research on Mormonism and other new religious movements, observes, "There have been precious few examples for which there is any persuasive evidence that the founder of a new religious movement had any symptoms of mental problems," and "few of the apparently sane recipients of revelations were frauds. Too many made personal sacrifices utterly incompatible with such an assessment." Rodney Stark, "A Theory of Revelations," *Journal for the*

33. See Scott C. Dunn, "Spirit Writing: Another Look at the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone*, June 1985, 17-26; reprinted as "Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon," in Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 17-46; Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 4-17, 68-70; and Richard N. Williams, "The Book of Mormon as Automatic Writing: Beware the *Virtus Dormitiva*," *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 23-29. "Traditional skeptics," notes Richard Williams, "often ask believers to give up a belief in a miracle in the face of a simpler and more reliable explanation." But the automatic writing theory is an explanation that explains nothing. It essentially asks that one reject Joseph Smith's story "in favor of an explanation that is less empirical, more occult, and more arcane than the belief itself." Williams, "Book of Mormon as Automatic Writing," 29.

34. Their claim that Joseph Smith "was prosecuted successfully in a court of law" for the practice of using a seer stone in searching for buried treasure is inaccurate. The actual charge appears to have been for being a "disorderly person," a misdemeanor of which Joseph Smith was acquitted (Gordon A. Madsen, "Joseph Smith's 1826 Trial: The Legal Setting," *BYU Studies* 30/2 [Spring 1990]: 91-108). The central issue is not whether or not Joseph Smith used seer stones, but whether he admitted to deliberate deception. The best historical evidence does not support that view, and many of Joseph Smith's closest associates were convinced that he had the gift of seership.

but they do not confront the difficulties that historical evidence for a dictated Book of Mormon manuscript poses to the Spalding-Rigdon theory. The Spalding-Rigdon theory suggests that Rigdon stole and then plagiarized a Spalding manuscript—not the known and clearly unrelated “Manuscript Story,” but a second, hypothetical manuscript that supplied the historical content of the Book of Mormon. This theory further suggests that Rigdon combined Spalding’s second manuscript of historical material with additional “religious” or theological content to create a third, more lengthy manuscript that constituted the text of the Book of Mormon. Under this theory, Rigdon went to a lot of trouble and effort to fabricate a lengthy document that he was then somehow able to convey to Joseph Smith from Ohio to New York. The original text of the Book of Mormon, however, was not written in the hand of Sidney Rigdon. It was, according to the testimony of those who observed the process, dictated by Joseph Smith to several scribes. Those who observed Joseph Smith during these activities reported that

- when dictating the text of the Book of Mormon, he would place the seer stone or Nephite interpreters in a hat;
- he would look into the hat, covering his face to obscure the surrounding light of the room;
- he would dictate for hours at a time within plain sight of others in the house;
- when dictating the text while looking in the hat, he did not use books, manuscripts, or notes of any kind;
- he would often spell out difficult names that the scribe could not spell; and

- when he began a new session of dictation, he would begin where he had previously stopped without a prompting or reminder.³⁵

If we are to argue, as Criddle and associates do, that Joseph Smith had somehow obtained a copy of Rigdon’s manuscript, we must also acknowledge that he did not, according to first-hand historical testimony, make use of it during the dictation. This is a matter that is difficult to reconcile with the Spalding-Rigdon theory. If a hypothetical Spalding-Rigdon manuscript were the source of the Book of Mormon, Joseph would have been required to memorize that lengthy and complex document before dictating the text to his scribes. So the problem is not simply one of getting Rigdon’s (hypothetical) manuscript to Joseph Smith (with or without the hypothetical automatic writers), even if he could have done so. Instead, this theory requires the relatively uneducated Joseph Smith to become familiar enough with Rigdon’s manuscript that he could dictate for hours on end without notes or prompting of any kind, with sufficient command of its details that he could dictate the spelling of unfamiliar names.

This fatal difficulty has led some critics to dismiss the primary historical testimony regarding the dictation altogether rather than abandon their theory. Textual evidence from the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon is consistent, however, with the witness testimony concerning the dictation. “By any measure,” writes historian Richard Bushman, “transcription was a miraculous process, calling for a huge leap of faith to believe, yet, paradoxically, it is more in harmony


35. Royal Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 61–93; and Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001).

with the young Joseph of the historical record” than are other explanations.³⁶

Conclusion

In sum, an authorship attribution study requires the consistent, coherent, and congruent conjunction of historical, biographical, and stylometric evidence to support the conjecture of a writer as the author of a text with disputed authorship. Such a combination of mutually supporting evidence has not been set forth by Criddle and associates. Even before statistical evidence can be considered, the historical context must make plausible the claim to be tested.

The stylometric analysis by Jockers, Witten, and Criddle is not the “knockout punch” that some Spalding-Rigdon theorists thought it might be. Its incomplete treatment of the historical material, which plays a big role in how they

later justified their mistaken use of a closed-set method, ignores a plethora of evidence that disagrees with the Spalding-Rigdon theory. Its literature review was so overtly dismissive of work associated with Mormon researchers that the authors missed the chance to benefit from previous findings, both when designing their study and interpreting their results. From a historical perspective, the Spalding-Rigdon theory is nothing but conjecture supported by imagination and special pleading since it requires the invocation of hypothetical manuscripts for which there is no evidence and events that are not only unattested in the historical record but also contradicted by it. Sidney Rigdon did not write the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith’s description of the book’s origin remains the only explanation not contradicted by valid, reliable evidence, both historical and stylometric. 

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36. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 72. For a discussion and useful collection of relevant documents relating to the translation of the Book of Mormon, see John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2005), 77–213.