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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Sidney B. Sperry: Steadfast Scholar

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Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): xxi-xxiii.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Personal reminiscences about Sidney B. Sperry.

Sidney B. Sperry: Steadfast Scholar

Richard Lloyd Anderson

In the Sperry years, a young apostle named Spencer Kimball addressed a Brigham Young University devotional on “A Style of Our Own,” of course speaking of the need to harmonize gospel modesty with fashion in dress. By that time Brother Sperry had taken religious studies far down a similar road by creating a “Scholarship of Our Own.” This quest did not aim at simplistic answers that bypassed hard issues. His own academic career started in science and moved to biblical languages, two fields that first mastered tools and then correlated hard data. For him there was no compromise on the truth of the Book of Mormon and the revelations of Joseph Smith. It was a given that these sources were part of the accurate body of information out of which a view of history and religious knowledge must be constructed. I have heard Brother Sperry tell of a Brigham Young University departmental official who said to a group that Sperry graduated from the University of Chicago without learning anything—meaning that he did not adopt the world view of religious liberalism which was then in vogue.

Two major paths of higher learning emerged in that put-down some six decades ago. Is graduate study memorizing and agreeing with some consensus of senior academicians? Is it the equivalent of a political party, defined by conclusions? Or is the doctorate a rigorous training in recognized skills, with the ability to have independent judgment on the meaning of objective information? I talked personally with another Latter-day Saint institute teacher

holding a doctorate from the University of Chicago in Brother Sperry's era. This man spent decades disseminating the point of view of his professors without much effort to bring insights from modern revelation to his field of the Old Testament, and he regretted passing up the offer to be pastor at a major Protestant church of liberal orientation. His scholarship had replaced his Mormonism instead of enriching it.

This story illustrates an element of the academic climate that Sidney Sperry faced on returning to Brigham Young University after graduate school and some residence in the Near East. Certainly not all Brigham Young University teachers espoused secular learning at the expense of their religious heritage, but enough lived up to the mission of the university to reflect the merging of revealed and secular knowledge. In this setting he had an impressive dream that I have heard him relate on several private occasions. It surprised him that the university was crowned by a temple above it because, as my wife accurately reports his detail, most people expected that building to be on the traditional "temple hill," near the Maeser Building. He felt that his view of the immensity and whiteness of the physical buildings was a wondrous symbol of the future blending of the glory of God with the best intelligence of mankind. Yet he took the dream so literally that he complained to Fred Markham, the architect of the first Joseph Smith Building, that new buildings did not contain enough white stone to match his earlier dream.

Sidney Sperry built solidly in his own area, where for a time he held the position we would now equate with a dean. He sought the combination of conviction and formal learning, recruiting a number of teachers who have since gone on to finish successful careers. I first came in contact with Brother Sperry when I was a college student after World War II and a successful mission. He heard that I sought to master biblical languages and contacted me to say that Brigham Young University furnished the best opportunities. He took a personal interest in asking Hugh Nibley to join him, and spent an early evening in conference with my father and me. Of course I was both flattered and persuaded to come to Brigham Young at the outset. When later pressures made formal Hebrew classes burdensome, Sidney Sperry took the initiative to ask me to come in regularly over a long period of

time for personal tutoring. His sharing of time beyond the classroom proves his depth of conviction of the value of gospel scholarship. In addition to this example, I learned from him that senior scholars have a duty to give copies of their own books and articles to those who might follow in their steps. Many who later became religion teachers attest that he practiced “mentoring” long before the term was invented.

The trademark of this man was personable optimism. In the halls and classroom he carried the warm spirit of brotherhood, not professional austerity. Jesus told the Twelve that they should freely give because they had freely received (Matthew 10:8). Sidney Sperry wrote much as a means of sharing the gospel. He probably served for decades in the Sunday School as a Gospel Doctrine teacher. In our early years of marriage, Carma and I were stimulated by a real study of doctrine by regularly attending his classes. As a student or colleague, I would stop in the hall to ask, “How are you, Brother Sperry?” I can still see his smile as he often answered, “Fine, as far as I’m translated correctly.”