

In 1843 six brass plates were found in a mound in Kinderhook, Illinois. Mormons who saw the plates were impressed by their ancient appearance and felt that they would prove Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon. In a letter written from Nauvoo, Illinois, dated May 2, 1843, Charlotte Haven said that when Joshua Moore "showed them to **Joseph [Smith]** the letter said that the figures or writing on them was similar to that in which the Book of Mormon was written, and if Mr. Moore could leave them, he thought that **by the help of revelation he would be able to translate them**" (*Overland Monthly*, Dec. 1890, page 630).

While the Kinderhook plates have often been put forth as evidence for Joseph Smith's claims concerning the Book of Mormon, there is another side to the story. Evidence now shows that the Kinderhook plates were actually modern forgeries created specifically for the purpose of entrapping Joseph Smith.

Joseph Smith accepted these plates as authentic and even claimed that he had translated a portion of them. The evidence comes from the diary of William Clayton, Joseph Smith's private secretary. The information in Clayton's journal was deemed so important that it was put in the first person and used as a basis for the story of the Kinderhook plates which is printed in the *History of the Church*, vol. 5, page 372. The following is attributed to Joseph Smith:

I insert fac-similes of the six brass plates found near Kinderhook, . . .

I have translated a portion of them and find they contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the Ruler of heaven and earth.

After the plates were found, nine "citizens of Kinderhook" certified that R. Wiley took the "six brass-plates" from "a large mound, in this vicinity." Unfortunately for the LDS position, it was later revealed that the plates were forgeries. On April 25, 1856, W. P. Harris, who was one of the nine witnesses to the discovery of the plates, wrote a letter in which he stated that the plates were not genuine:

. . . I was present with a number at or near Kinderhook and helped to dig at the time the plates were found . . . I . . . made an honest affidavit to the same. . . . since that time, Bridge Whitten said to me that he cut and prepared the plates and he . . . and R. Wiley engraved them themselves. . . . Wilbourn Fugate appeared to be the chief, with R. Wiley and B. Whitten. (*The Book of Mormon?* by James D. Bales, pp. 95-96)

On June 30, 1879, W. Fugate, who was also one of the nine people who signed the certificate, wrote a letter in which he admitted his part in the hoax:

I received your letter in regard to those plates, and will say in answer that they are a **humbug**, gotten up by Robert Wiley, Bridge Whitten and myself. . . . We read in Pratt's prophecy that "Truth is yet to spring out of the earth." We concluded to prove the prophecy by way of a joke. (Letter of W. Fugate, as cited in *The Kinderhook Plates* by Welby W. Ricks, reprinted from the *Improvement Era*, September 1962)

At the time of the Civil War the Kinderhook plates were lost. M. Wilford Poulson, of Brigham Young University, later found one of the original plates in the Chicago Historical Society Museum. The plate which he found has been identified

as no. 5 in the facsimiles printed in the *History of the Church*. While Professor Poulson's research led him to believe that the plate was a forgery, Welby W. Ricks, who was President of the BYU Archaeological Society, hailed the discovery as a vindication of Joseph Smith's work:

A recent rediscovery of one of the Kinderhook plates which was examined by Joseph Smith, Jun., reaffirms his prophetic calling and reveals the false statements made by one of the finders. . . .

The plates are now back in their original category of **genuine**. . . . Joseph Smith, Jun., stands as a true prophet and translator of ancient records by divine means and all the world is invited to investigate the truth which has sprung out of the earth not only of the Kinderhook plates, but of the Book of Mormon as well. (*The Kinderhook Plates*)

In 1965, three years after Mr. Ricks made this triumphant announcement, George M. Lawrence, an LDS physicist was given permission to examine and make "some non-destructive physical studies of the surviving plate." In his "Report of a Physical Study of the Kinderhook Plate Number 5," George Lawrence wrote:

The dimensions, tolerances, composition and workmanship are consistent with the facilities of an 1843 blacksmith shop and with the fraud stories of the original participants.

Since Mr. Lawrence was only allowed to make non-destructive tests, some LDS scholars would not accept his work as conclusive. In 1980, however, LDS scholar Stanley P. Kimball was able "to secure permission from the Chicago Historical

Society for the recommended destructive tests.” Professor Kimball described the results of the tests in the official LDS Church publication, *The Ensign*, August 1981, pages 66-70:

A recent electronic and chemical analysis of a metal plate. . . brought in 1843 to the prophet Joseph Smith. . . appears to solve a previously unanswered question in Church history, helping to further evidence that the plate is what its producers later said it was—a nineteenth-century attempt to lure Joseph Smith into making a translation of ancient-looking characters that had been etched into the plates. . . . As a result of these tests, we concluded that the plate . . . **is not of ancient origin.** . . . we concluded that the plate was made from a true brass alloy (copper and zinc) typical of the mid-nineteenth century; whereas the “brass” of ancient times was actually bronze, an alloy of copper and tin.

If Joseph Smith had not been murdered in June 1844, it is very possible he might have published a complete “translation” of these bogus plates. Just a month before his death it was reported that he was “busy in **translating them.** The new work . . . will be nothing more nor less than a **sequel to the Book of Mormon . . .**” (*Warsaw Signal*, May 22, 1844). The fact that Joseph Smith was actually preparing to print a translation of the plates is verified by a broadside published by the LDS newspaper, *The Nauvoo Neighbor*, in June 1843. On this broadside, containing facsimiles of the plates, we find the following:

The contents of the Plates, together with a Fac-Simile of the same, will be published in the “Times and Seasons,” as soon as the **translation is completed.**

In any case, it is obvious that Joseph Smith’s work on these fraudulent plates casts serious doubt upon his credibility as a translator of LDS scriptures like the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham. Smith’s work on the Kinderhook plates was supposed to have revealed that they “contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt and that he received his kingdom from the Ruler of heaven and earth.” Now, in order to derive this much information from the plates it would have been necessary to have “translated” quite a number of the words. A man who could invent such information from bogus plates is just the type of man who would pretend to translate the Book of Abraham from Egyptian papyri which he really knew nothing about or the Book of Mormon from golden plates which he never made available to scholars. Charles A. Shook once observed: “Only a bogus prophet translates bogus plates.” While this may not be the most tactful way of putting it, this is a very serious problem which cannot be brushed aside. Furthermore, Jesus himself has told us to “Beware of false prophets” (Matthew 7:15).

While the forged Kinderhook plates present a real dilemma for those who maintain Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, Smith’s purported translation of the Book of Abraham presents an even greater problem. For more information on these subjects see the book, *Major Problems of Mormonism.*

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JOSEPH SMITH AND THE KINDERHOOK PLATES

