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BOOK OF MORMON PLATES: ARTIFACT, VISION OR HOAX?

This year the LDS Church is celebrating the 200th anniversary of Joseph Smith's birth on December 23, 1805. Joseph claimed that God and Christ appeared to him when he was fourteen, in the spring of 1820, and told him not to join any church for they were all in a state of apostasy. God was about to restore His true church through the instrumentality of Smith.

Three years later, in 1823, Smith claimed a messenger from God appeared to him and told him about a record hidden in a hill outside of Palmyra, New York, close to Smith's home. In the introduction to the current Book of Mormon we read:

The Book of Mormon . . . is a record of God's dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas . . . The record gives an account of two great civilizations. One came from Jerusalem [to America] in 600 B.C., and afterward separated into two nations, known as the Nephites and the Lamanites. The other came much earlier when the Lord confounded the tongues at the Tower of Babel. This group is known as the Jaredites.

This record also contained an account of the appearance of Jesus Christ to the Nephites shortly after his crucifixion.

According to Smith, the angel who appeared to him was Moroni, the last person to have written on this record prior to it being buried, approximately 421 A.D. Moroni, now a resurrected being, instructed Smith that he must keep himself from evil, follow God in righteous behavior and he would eventually be permitted to translate the hidden record. Four years later, on September 22, 1827, Moroni

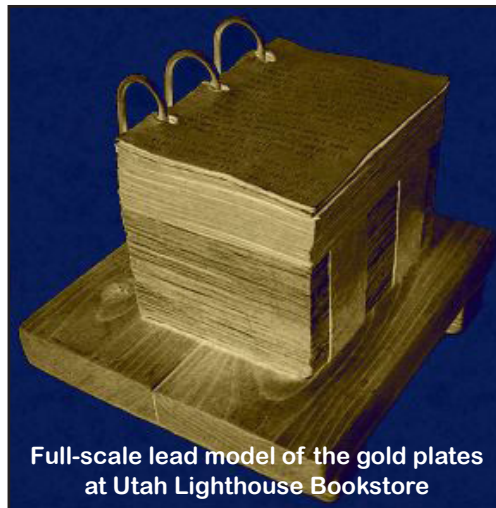
directed Smith to the spot on the hill where he was able to uncover the plates.

Then in the spring of 1830 Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon and founded the Church of Christ, later to be renamed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, few know the background and problems associated with his claims.

Joseph Smith and his father first garnered the public's attention in 1820 due to their involvement in money-digging. Joseph's claims of special magic powers took on greater meaning in 1822 when he found a small chocolate-colored stone while digging a well for a neighbor, Willard Chase. This stone was thought to have the power to direct a person to buried treasures.

In 1833, Mr. Chase gave the following statement regarding the Smiths:

I became acquainted with the Smith family, known as the authors of the Mormon Bible, in the year 1820. At that time, they were engaged in the money digging business, which they followed until the latter part of the season of 1827. In the year 1822, I was engaged in digging a well. I employed Alvin [Joseph's brother] and Joseph Smith to assist me; the latter of whom is now known as the Mormon prophet. After digging about twenty feet below the surface of the earth, we discovered a singularly appearing stone . . . and as



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we were examining it, Joseph put it into his hat, and then his face into the top of his hat. . . . The next morning he [Joseph] came to me and wished to obtain the stone, alledging that he could see in it . . . (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, edited by Dan Vogel, Signature Books, 1998, pp. 65-66)

William Stafford, one of the first settlers of Palmyra, New York, gave the following statement in 1833:

I first became acquainted with Joseph, Sen., and his family in the year 1820. They lived, at that time, in Palmyra, about one mile and a half from my residence. A great part of their time was devoted to digging for money: especially in the night time, when they said the money could be most easily obtained. I have heard them tell marvelous tales, respecting the discoveries they had made in their peculiar occupation of money digging. They would say, for instance, that in such a place, in such a hill, on a certain man's farm, there were deposited keys, barrels and logsheads of coined silver and gold—bars of gold, golden images, brass kettles filled with gold and silver—gold candlesticks, swords, &c. &c. They would say, also, that nearly all the hills in this part of New York, were thrown up by human hands, and in them were large caves, which **Joseph Smith, Jr., could see, by placing a stone of singular appearance in his hat**, in such a manner as to exclude all light; at which time pretended he could see all things within and under the earth,—that he could see within the above mentioned caves, large gold bars and silver plates—that he could also discover the spirits in whose charge these treasures were, clothed in ancient dress. The facility of approaching them, depended in great measure on the state of the moon. New moon and good Friday, I believe, were regarded as the most favorable times for obtaining these treasures. (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, pp. 59-60)

Further on in the same statement Mr. Stafford related:

At another time, they [the Smiths] devised a scheme, by which they might satiate their hunger, with the mutton of one of my sheep. They had seen in my flock of sheep, a large, fat, black weather. Old Joseph and one of the boys came to me one day, and said that Joseph Jr. had discovered some very remarkable and valuable treasures, which could be procured only in one way. That way, was as follows: — That a black sheep should be taken on to the ground where the treasures were concealed—that after cutting its throat, it should be led around a circle while bleeding. This being done, the wrath of the evil spirit would be appeased: the treasures could then be obtained, and my share of them was to be four fold. To gratify my curiosity, I let them have a large fat sheep. They afterwards informed me, that the sheep was killed pursuant to commandment; but as there was some mistake in the process, it did not have desired effect. This, I believe, is the only time they ever made money-digging a profitable business. They, however, had around them constantly a worthless gang,

whose employment it was to dig money nights, and who, day times, had more to do with mutton than money. (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 61)

Many of the Smith neighbors and acquaintances gave similar statements telling of the Smiths' involvement in magical practices and money-digging. These have now been collected and reproduced in *Early Mormon Documents*, compiled by Dan Vogel, volumes 2-5.

Joseph Smith's mother confirmed his notoriety as a glass-looker, or soothsayer, and related how a Mr. Stowell traveled across the state to hire him:

A short time before the house was completed [1825], a man by the name of Josiah Stool [Stowell] came from Chenango county, New York, with the view of getting Joseph to assist him in **digging for a silver mine** [in Pennsylvania]. He came for Joseph on account of having heard that **he possessed certain means by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye**. (*Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and his Progenitors for Many Generations*, by Lucy Smith, 1853, p. 91; also reproduced in *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, edited by Lavina F. Anderson, Signature Books, 2001, pp. 359-360)

H. Michael Marquardt relates that both of Smith's parents claimed Stowell sought him out specifically because of his magic stone:

Smith's father and mother indicated that he was more than a hired hand for Stowell. Joseph Sr. reportedly told Fayette Lapham that his son went to Harmony, Pennsylvania, "at the request of some one who wanted the assistance of his divining rod and stone in finding hidden treasure, supposed to have been deposited there by the Indians or others." Similarly Lucy recalled that Stowell had sought her son's help because he heard Joseph "possessed certain keys, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye."

In other words it was because of Smith's reputation that father and son made the trip of over one hundred miles to Harmony, Pennsylvania, where Stowell employed them to help locate the mine. Smith was now nineteen and his father fifty-four. (*The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*, by H. Michael Marquardt, Xulon, 2005, p. 63)

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Involvement in magic stones and treasure-digging was quite common in the New England states in the early 1800's and many did not view it as antithetical to an active church life. Fawn Brodie, famous biographer of Joseph Smith, told of the community interest in treasure-digging and the influence of Luman Walters, the magician:

Excitement over the possibilities of Indian treasure, and perhaps buried Spanish gold, reached its height in Palmyra with the coming of what the editor of the Palmyra *Reflector* called a "vagabond fortune-teller" named Walters, who so won the confidence of several farmers that for some months they paid him three dollars a day to hunt for buried money on their property. In addition to crystals, stuffed toads, and mineral rods, the scryer's usual paraphernalia, Walters claimed to have found an ancient Indian record that described the locations of their hidden treasure. This he would read aloud to his followers in what seemed to be a strange and exotic tongue but was actually, the newspaper editor declared, an old Latin version of Caesar's [Cicero's] *Orations*. The press accounts describing Walter's activity, published in 1830-1, stated significantly that when he left the neighborhood, his mantle fell upon young Joseph Smith. (*No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet*, by Fawn Brodie, 1971, Knopf, p. 19. For more information on Luman Walters, see *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, by D. Michael Quinn, Signature Books, 1998 ed., pp. 116-132)

While working for Mr. Stowell, Joseph and his father entered into an agreement with several other money-diggers that they would share in any treasure find. H. Michael Marquardt commented on that agreement:

On November 1, 1825, soon after their arrival in Harmony and in anticipation of their discoveries, Stowell's treasure digging company drew up "Articles of Agreement." This agreement stipulated, "if anything of value should be obtained at a certain place in Pennsylvania near a Wm. Hale's, supposed to be a valuable mine of either Gold or Silver and also to contain coined money and bars or ingots of Gold or Silver," each member would receive a share, . . . According to this agreement, Joseph Sr. and his son Joseph (who both signed the agreement) would receive "two elevenths of all the property that may be obtained." (*The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*, pp. 63-64)

The entire agreement is reproduced in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, pp. 407-413. This agreement would come back to haunt Smith when these men felt that they should have a share in the Book of Mormon gold plates. This led to a number of attempts to steal the plates from the Smiths.

The men probably became aware from Willard Chase that Smith was about to retrieve the plates from the hill.

Chase had been requested by Smith to make a chest in which he could store the plates. Dan Vogel observed:

The cabinet maker was probably Willard Chase, who said Smith came to him about that time and "requested me to make him a chest, informing me that he designed to move back to Pennsylvania, and expecting soon to get his gold book, he wanted a chest to lock it up, giving me to understand at the same time, that if I would make the chest he would give me a share in the book." Chase declined because he had other more pressing work . . . Despite his skepticism about the gold plates, Chase would soon join other treasure seekers in an effort to find where Smith had hidden them.

The discussion with Chase tipped off the other treasure seekers, who became angry with Smith for keeping the plates from them. . . . Recalling a visit to the area in 1828, David Whitmer [one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon] stated: "I had conversations with several young men who said that Joseph Smith had certainly golden plates, and that before he attained them he had promised to share with them, but had not done so, and they were very much incensed with him." (*Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, by Dan Vogel, Signature Books, 2004, p. 95)

LDS historians generally agree that Joseph Smith was involved in magical practices as a young man but tend to minimize its importance. However, Richard Bushman, a well-respected LDS scholar, has devoted several pages to the Smith's money-digging in his new book, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. On page 50 he notes:

The Smiths were as susceptible as their neighbors to treasure-seeking folklore. In addition to rod and stone divining, the Smiths probably believed in the rudimentary astrology found in the ubiquitous almanacs. Magical parchments handed down in the Hyrum Smith family may have originally belonged to Joseph Sr. The visit of the angel and the discovery of the gold plates would have confirmed the belief in supernatural power. For people in a magical frame of mind, Moroni sounded like one of the spirits who stood guard over treasure in the tales of treasure-seeking. The similarities may even have made the extraordinary story more credible in the Smith family. Lucy recognized the crossover in prefacing her narrative of the plates with a caution against thinking

that we stopt our labor and went at trying to win the **faculty of Abrac drawing Magic circles or sooth saying** to the neglect of all kinds of business we never during our lives suffered one important interest to swallow up every other obligation but whilst we worked with our hands we endeavored to remember the service of & the welfare of our souls.

Lucy's point was that the Smiths were not lazy—they had not stopped their labor to practice magic—but she showed her knowledge of formulas and rituals and associated

them with “the welfare of our souls.” Magic and religion melded in Smith family culture. . . .

Joseph Jr. never repudiated the stones or denied their power to find treasure. Remnants of the magical culture stayed with him to the end. (*Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, by Richard L. Bushman, 2005, Knopf, pp. 50-51)

In 1826, while working for Mr. Stowell, Joseph Smith was charged with a misdemeanor due to his magic practices. Mr. Stowell’s nephew brought the charges against Smith, believing that Smith was an imposter. Richard Bushman writes:

Notes of a March 1826 court appearance in South Bainbridge shed light on the Smith family’s attitudes toward treasure-seeking on the eve of receiving the plates. Peter Bridgeman, nephew of Josiah Stowell, entered a complaint against Joseph Smith Jr. as a disorderly person in South Bainbridge, Chenango County, New York. New York law specified that anyone **pretending** to have skill in discovering lost goods should be judged a **disorderly person**. . . . Presumably, Bridgeman believed that Joseph was trying to cheat the old man by claiming magical powers. In the court record, Stowell said that he “had the most implicit faith in the Prisoners skill,” implying that was the reason for hiring Joseph. (*Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, pp. 51-52)

The documents relating to this 1826 event leave some questions as to whether this was a preliminary hearing or the actual trial. That is not as important as the information they provide about Joseph Smith’s activities at that time. They demonstrate that he was active in folk magic during the very time period that he was supposedly being groomed by an angel for his calling as prophet and seer.

(For more details on this 1826 court proceeding, see *Inventing Mormonism*, by Walters and Marquardt, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, by Dan Vogel, and *Early Mormon Documents*, edited by Dan Vogel, vol. 2-4, and our *Joseph Smith and Money Digging*. For more details on the Smith’s involvement with magic, see *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, by D. Michael Quinn, and our *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*.)

GETTING THE PLATES

Martin Harris, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, gave an account of Smith finding the plates in his 1859 interview in *Tiffany’s Monthly*:

Joseph Smith, jr., found at Palmyra, N.Y., on the 22nd day of September, 1827, the plates of gold upon which was recorded . . . the Book of Mormon. . . . Joseph had a **stone** which was dug from the well of Mason Chase [father of Willard], twenty-four feet from the surface. In this stone he

could see many things to my certain knowledge. **It was by means of this stone he first discovered these plates**. . . .

Joseph had had this stone for some time. There was a company there in that neighborhood, who were digging for money supposed to have been hidden by the ancients. Of this company were old Mr. Stowel—I think his name was Josiah—also old Mr. [Alvah] Beman, also Samuel Lawrence, George Proper, Joseph Smith, jr., and his father, and his brother Hiram Smith. They dug for money in Palmyra, Manchester, also in Pennsylvania, and other places. **When Joseph found this stone, there was a company digging in Harmony, Pa., and they took Joseph to look in the stone for them**, and he did so for a while, and then he told them the enchantment was so strong he could not see, and they gave it up. There he became acquainted with his future wife, the daughter of old Mr. Isaac Hale, where he boarded. (Reprinted in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, pp. 302-304)

Further on in the same article Harris stated:

The money-diggers claimed that they had as much right to the plates as Joseph had, as they were in company together. They claimed that Joseph had been traitor, and had appropriated to himself that which belonged to them. For this reason Joseph was afraid of them, and continued concealing the plates. (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 307)

At another place in the article Harris observed:

Joseph had before this described the manner of his finding the plates. **He found them by looking in the stone found in the well of Mason Chase**. The family had likewise told me the same thing.

Joseph said the angel told him he must quit the company of the money-diggers. That there were wicked men among them. (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 309)

In Smith’s history at the back of the *Pearl of Great Price*, we read that the angel first appeared to him in 1823 during the night and early morning of September 21st and 22nd. The angel instructed Smith to meet with him on the same date every year until he got the plates (see Joseph Smith—History 1:29 and 53, *Pearl of Great Price*). One of the interesting things about the annual visit of the angel on September 22, from 1823 to 1827, is the date’s association with magic. D. Michael Quinn devotes chapter five of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* to a discussion of the magical implications of the dating and various aspects of both Smith’s first vision and the September 22 angel vision on the autumnal equinox (see *Early Mormonism*, p. 144).

While Joseph Smith claimed that an angel first informed him of the ancient record in 1823, he was not allowed to retrieve the plates from the hill south of Palmyra, New York, until 1827. Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy, gave the following account of that event:

The plates were secreted about three miles from home. . . . Joseph, on coming to them, took them from their secret place, and, wrapping them in his linen frock, placed them under his arm and started for home.

After proceeding a short distance, he thought it would be more safe to leave the road and go through the woods. Traveling some distance after he left the road, he came to a large windfall, and as he was jumping over a log, a man sprang up from behind it, and gave him a heavy blow with a gun. Joseph turned around and knocked him down, then ran at the top of his speed. About half a mile further he was attacked again in the same manner as before; he knocked this man down in like manner as the former, and ran on again; and before he reached home he was assaulted the third time. In striking the last one he dislocated his thumb, which, however, he did not notice until he came within sight of the house, when he threw himself down in the corner of the fence in order to recover his breath. As soon as he was able, he arose and came to the house. He was still altogether speechless from fright and the fatigue of running. (*Lucy's Book*, pp. 385-386, *Biographical Sketches*, by Lucy Smith, pp. 104-105)

This seems to have been an effort by the money-diggers to get the treasure that they felt had been wrongfully kept from them.

PLATES OF GOLD?

Joseph Smith recorded in his official history that the angel informed him the plates were gold:

When first I looked upon him, I was afraid; but the fear soon left me. He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me and that his name was Moroni. . . . He said there was a book deposited, **written upon gold plates**, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the sources from whence they sprang. (*History of the Church*, vol. 1, by Joseph Smith, Deseret Book, 1976, pp. 11-12)

However, in 1842, Smith seemed to qualify his description of the plates. He wrote to John Wentworth that the plates had “the appearance of gold”:

These records were engraven on plates which had **the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin.** They were filled with engravings, in **Egyptian characters**, and bound together in a volume as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something **near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved.** (*History of the Church*, vol. 4, p. 537)

The change from stating the plates were “gold” to the “appearance of gold” was possibly due to someone pointing out that a stack of plates such as he described would have weighed somewhere in the vicinity of 200 pounds. Since he supposedly ran a distance of three miles, jumping over obstacles, and warding off assailants, all while carrying the plates, his story would lack credibility.

WEIGHT OF THE PLATES

A discussion of the weight and size of the plates was given by LDS Apostle John A. Widtsoe and Franklin S. Harris:

The plates upon which the Book of Mormon was engraved were **made of gold** and have been described as being **about six inches wide by eight inches long by six inches thick.** A cube of **solid gold** of that size, if the gold were pure, would weigh **two hundred pounds**, which would be a heavy weight for a man to carry, even though he were of the athletic type of Joseph Smith. This has been urged as an evidence against the truth of the Book of Mormon, since it is known that **on several occasions the Prophet carried the plates in his arms.** It is very **unlikely**, however, that the plates were made of **pure gold.** They would have been too soft and in danger of destruction by distortion. For the purpose of record keeping, plates made of **gold mixed with a certain amount of copper** would be better, . . . If the plates were made of eight karat gold, which is gold frequently used in present-day jewelry, and allowing a **10 percent space between the leaves**, the total weight of the plates would not be above **one hundred and seventeen pounds**—a weight **easily** carried by a man as strong as was Joseph Smith. (*Seven Claims of The Book of Mormon: A Collection of Evidences*, by John A. Widtsoe and Franklin S. Harris, Jr., Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1937, pp. 38-39) While Apostle Widtsoe proposes a possible weight for the plates of 117 pounds, the friends of Smith estimated them to be between 40 and 60 pounds.

Martin Harris estimated the weight of the plates at “forty or fifty pounds” (*Tiffany's Monthly*, 1859, p. 166, reprinted in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 306). This would not be enough weight for them to be made of lead, let alone gold. We have a set of lead plates made to the size described by Smith and they weigh 117 pounds. This weight is too great and the plates too cumbersome for Smith to have run through the woods three miles while fighting off attackers, as described by both Martin Harris and Smith's mother, Lucy.

A number of people mention “hefting” the plates: Lucy and Martin Harris, their daughter, Emma Smith, Lucy Smith, William Smith and others. Martin Harris related:

My daughter said, they were about as much as she could lift. They were now in the glass-box, and my wife said they were **very heavy. They both lifted them.** (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 309)

If the plates weighed only “forty or fifty pounds” as Harris stated, his wife and daughter possibly could have picked them up. But are we to believe that this young woman hefted at least 117 pounds?

Dan Vogel theorizes that Smith could have constructed a set of plates from tin:

His [Smith’s] remark that a plate was not quite as thick as common tin may have been meant to divert attention from the possibility that they were actually made from some material otherwise readily available to him. Indeed, his prohibition against visual inspection seems contrived to the skeptic who might explain that the would-be prophet constructed a set of plates to be felt through a cloth.

The construction of such a book would have been relatively easy. There were scraps of tin available on the Smith property and elsewhere in the vicinity, . . . Using a pair of metal shears, it would have been easy to cut a number of 6x8-inch sheets. A hole punch, nail, or some similar instrument could have been used to make three holes along one edge of each plate. Then it would have been a matter of passing three wires or rods through the holes and bending them into rings. A book made of tin plates of the dimensions (6x8x6 inches) described by Smith would have weighed between fifty and sixty pounds, corresponding to the weight that was mentioned by eye-witness accounts. (*Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, p. 98)

TUMBAGA?

In order to explain the disparity between the plates being gold and the weight given by those who hefted the covered plates, Mormons have suggested that the plates were made out of “tumbaga,” a metal made out of part gold and part copper. They assume the plates were approximately 8 to 12 carat gold. For instance, LDS author Michael Ash proposes a possible weight “between 53 and 86 pounds.” Apostle Widtsoe’s figures were also calculated with an assumption of 8 carat gold. The difference is that Widtsoe (*Seven Claims of The Book of Mormon*, p. 38) assumed a “10 percent space between the leaves” while Ash assumes that the “unevenness left by the **hammering and air spaces** between the separate plates would reduce the weight to probably **less than 50 percent** of the solid block.” (www.mormonfortress.com/gweight.html)

One problem with this theory is that Mormons also maintain the plates contained very fine, small characters (necessary in order to write the entire Book of Mormon on

the relatively few sheets). This would seem to necessitate a fairly smooth surface. The argument for uneven sheets resulting in fifty percent weight loss would also reduce the number of plates available for engraving.

Bill McKeever gave the following response to the effort of an LDS organization, FARMS, to promote the tumbaga theory:

The FARMS’ article supports the tumbaga theory by referring to William Smith, Joseph’s brother, who was quoted in the *Saints Herald* (31, 1884, p. 644) as stating that the plates were a mixture of gold and copper. One can only imagine how William arrived at such a conclusion since there is no evidence to suggest that the plates were ever analyzed. Making William’s statement even less credible is the fact that he admitted to having never seen the plates. He claimed, “*I was permitted to lift them as they laid in a pillow-case; but not to see them, as was contrary to the commands he had received. They weighed about sixty pounds according to the best of my judgment*” (*A New Witness for Christ in America* 2:417). FARMS insists that tumbaga plates would have weighed only about 53 pounds. In other words, it would be like carrying a sack of redi-mix concrete.

Despite the effort from FARMS to change LDS history, it appears that the tumbaga theory is not being taken too seriously. As recently as May 15, 1999, the LDS Church News ran an article entitled “Hands-on opportunity.” Speaking of Joseph Smith, it read, “He had also been instructed by an angel, Moroni, who had met with him each year for four years. On his last visit, he was entrusted with **plates of solid gold**, which he had been translating by the power of the Spirit.” (<http://www.mrm.org/multimedia/text/how-heavy.html>)

To date LDS scholars have failed to show that native Americans recorded their history or religious texts on metal sheets during the Book of Mormon time period. Deanne Matheny, anthropologist and former instructor at BYU, commented:

The peoples of Mesoamerica possessed a stone age technology, and metal appears to have arrived late in the sequence of most regions, where it was little used for utilitarian objects (“Does The Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” by Deanne G. Matheny, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe, Signature Books, 1993, p. 276).

CAPACITY OF THE PLATES

Joseph Smith stated that “each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin” and that the stack of plates were “near six inches in thickness.” He also related that part of the stack “was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved” (*History of the Church*, vol. 4, p. 537).

LDS Apostle Orson Pratt added that “two-thirds were sealed up, and Joseph was commanded not to break the seal” (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 3, p. 347). Supposedly the sealed portion contained deeper religious teachings that the world was not ready to receive. Thus all of the Book of Mormon text would have been engraved on only one third of the plates.

LDS Apostle Widtsoe and Franklin Harris tried to resolve the problem of fitting the entire Book of Mormon text on the unsealed portion of the plates:

At first sight, one unfamiliar with the subject questions the possibility of writing the whole of the **five hundred and twenty-two pages** of the Book of Mormon upon a series of gold plates with **a total thickness of about two inches** (one-third of the whole volume of plates) . . .

The question before us is, Could one-third (two-thirds being sealed) of a volume of metal leaves **six by eight by six** (the Prophet Joseph), or eight by seven by four inches (Martin Harris), or eight by seven by six inches (Orson Pratt) contain **a sufficient number of plates**, each as thick as parchment or tin, to yield the necessary space for the entire text of the Book of Mormon? If so, what about their immense weight? Upon **“a sheet of paper, eight by seven inches**, a Hebrew translation of **fourteen pages** of the American text of the Book of Mormon has been written in the modern, square Hebrew letters in common use. . . . It is demonstrated on this sheet that the entire text of the Book of Mormon, as the American readers have it, could have been written in Hebrew on **forty and three-sevenths pages—twenty-one plates in all.**” (Sjodahl, p. 39.) (*Seven Claims of The Book of Mormon*, pp. 38-39)

However, the example of Hebrew writing they refer to is produced on paper, not metal, and the text is far too small to have been engraved by ancient means. A picture of this sheet is included in the LDS textbook *Book of Mormon Student Manual*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981, p. 14. (See the picture on page 8.)

Yet, when one looks at the sample of script that Joseph Smith copied off the plates, it has no resemblance to Hebrew and looks like it would take far more space. Below is a photo of the Book of Mormon script.

The squiggles and curving lines look like they would be much harder to engrave than Hebrew. It should also be noted that the scribes in the Book of Mormon stated that the record was kept in “reformed Egyptian” not Hebrew (Mormon 9:32). The next two verses explain that they didn’t use Hebrew because it would have taken more space:

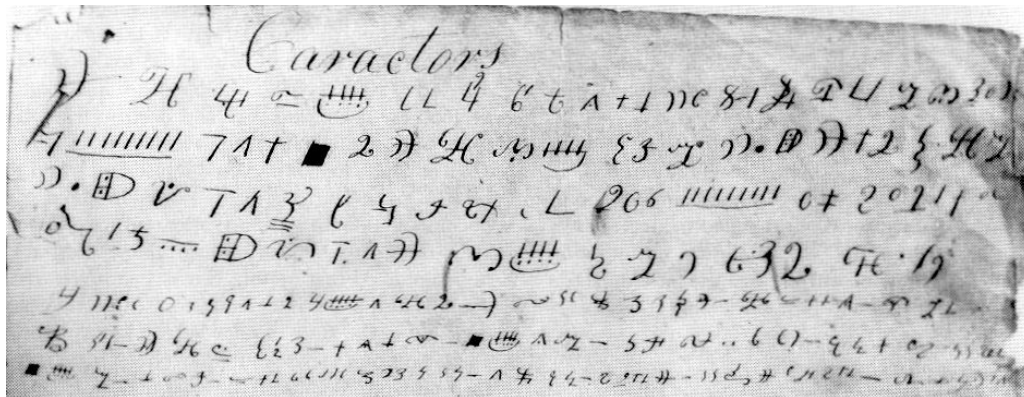
And if our plates had been **sufficiently large** we should have written in **Hebrew**; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also; and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record.

But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also that none other people knoweth our language. (Mormon 9:33-34)

Smith’s script would not lend itself to the compact engraving necessary to fit the Book of Mormon text on two inches of plates.

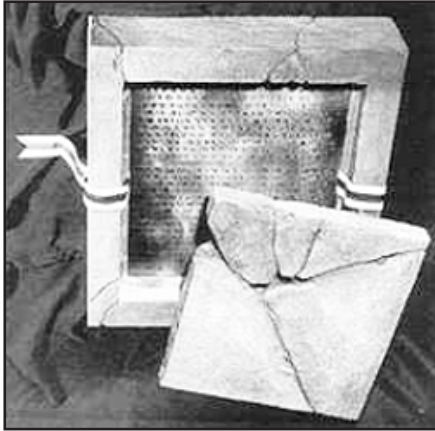
Getting all of the Book of Mormon on a two inch stack of plates becomes even more complicated since the text of the 116 pages lost by Martin Harris must be included.

Martin Harris acted as scribe for Smith during the spring of 1828. During that time Smith dictated at least 116 pages of text. Harris begged Smith to let him take the manuscript to show his wife to reassure her that Smith was truly working on a book of great worth. Smith finally agreed to let Harris borrow the pages. However, it is assumed Mrs. Harris, fearing the loss of their money in this scheme, destroyed the pages. Smith evidently feared that Mrs. Harris was setting some sort of a trap to test him. If he couldn’t come up with the same translation again she could expose him as a charlatan. To avert this crisis, Smith announced that the angel had informed him that the record also contained the “small plates of Nephi” and he was to skip over the part he had previously translated and begin his manuscript with these pages. Thus, when computing the number of plates necessary to contain the entire Book of Mormon as we know it today, one must also include the number of plates necessary to supply 116 pages of text lost by Harris.



That text would have had to be part of the two inch stack (see illustration at http://www.lightplanet.com/mormons/basic/bom/plates_eom.htm). Thus the text of the present Book of Mormon would have to be written on one fifth less plates than LDS scholars are proposing.

In the photos at the front of the 1978 paperback edition of the Book of Mormon was a picture of a metal plate from Persia, dating to the fourth century B.C. A photo of this plate is also on the LDS site http://www.lightplanet.com/mormons/basic/bom/plates_eom.htm. See photo below.



The caption under the picture in the front of the 1978 Book of Mormon states that the Darius tablet is “about the size of the gold plates of the Book of Mormon.” However, the picture on the University of Chicago Oriental Museum’s web page shows someone holding one of the plates and it looks several inches larger in both directions. (http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/PA/IRAN/PAAI/IMAGES/PER/MF/5A2_4.html)

Also, it is a special declaration by King Darius, written in three different scripts, thus containing only one paragraph of actual text. (See http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/PA/IRAN/PAAI/IMAGES/PER/MF/5A3_4.html)

This example is supposed to convince us that a written record like the Book of Mormon is possible. However, since the engravings are relatively large and widely spaced, they demonstrate that the claim of getting all of the Book of Mormon text on plates 6x8 inches and 2 inches high isn’t feasible. Keep in mind that one must also leave room on the plates for the three holes for the rings and the text of the 116 lost pages of transcript.

LDS apologists also use the copper scroll found among the Dead Sea Scrolls as another example of writing on metal. However, the copper scroll again demonstrates the relatively small amount of text usually engraved on metal. On the right is a photo from http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/wsrp/educational_site/dead_sea Scrolls/copperscroll_e.shtml

Notice how the engraving pushes right through the plate. Obviously it would be very hard, if not impossible, to engrave on both sides of thin plates. Yet, even by LDS calculations, the Book of Mormon engravings must be on both sides of the plates in order to accommodate the full text of the book on two inches of plates being “as thick as parchment or tin.”

While metal plates have been used for centuries, there is no parallel to the extensive sets of plates mentioned in connection with the civilizations of the Book of Mormon. Thomas J. Finley, Professor and Chair of the Department of Old Testament and Semitics at Talbot School of Theology, observed:

The Book of Mormon mentions plates of brass or of gold that were used to preserve a wide variety of materials, from genealogies to history and prophecy. . . .

There is no question that metal was sometimes used as writing material in the ancient world, including the Near East. However, such examples do not seem to parallel the lengthy Book of Mormon, since they normally contain a small amount of material and imitate standard writing procedures for the time. . . .

At the palace of Darius (Apadana), one gold and one silver plate containing the king’s trilingual inscription was found “in a stone box beneath the northeast corner of the main hall of the Apadana.” . . . This inscription contains only



Copper Scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls

eight lines of cuneiform writing repeated in three languages. The purpose of the inscription was to describe the extent of Darius's kingdom and to request the god Ahuramazda for protection for him and his "house." . . . Even so, there is no parallel among materials in cuneiform writing for the many plates it would have taken to record even the book of 1 Nephi.

The copper scroll from cave three of Qumran rather uniquely has a longer text (though not nearly as long as the Book of Mormon). . . . Unlike the brass or gold plates discussed in the Book of Mormon, this work attempted to imitate a "standard parchment scroll." ("Does the Book of Mormon Reflect an Ancient Near Eastern Background?," *New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, edited by Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, Zondervan, 2002, pp. 340-341)

Dr. Finley further states:

Turning back to the Book of Mormon, the emphasis on the "plates of brass" (1 Nephi 4:38, etc.), "plates of ore" (Mosiah 21:27), "plates of gold" (Mosiah 28:11), "plates of Nephi" (1 Nephi 9:1-4), and "plates of Jacob" (Jacob 3:14) is quite impressive. It appears to be a motif or minor theme of the entire book. . . . These recordings were quite extensive, and it would have been at least awkward to transport them from place to place. In contrast, the extremely important materials of the Bible were passed on through scribal transmission on leather, papyrus, and parchment—materials much more easily transportable and convenient to use. While metal was used in the ancient New East for writing material, the dissimilarities in usage with the Book of Mormon outweigh the similarity of material. (*New Mormon Challenge*, p. 342)

Where is an example of a Near East or New World religious text or history recorded on such extensive plates? Why didn't Biblical scribes use metal? Obviously the texts were too long, metal plates too expensive and difficult to engrave, for such wholesale use as depicted in the Book of Mormon.

WHY SO WORDY?

When one considers the effort to make the plates and then to engrave them, one would expect the author to give serious thought to being succinct, not wordy. Nephi's brother, Jacob complained:

I cannot write but a **little** of my words, because of the **difficulty of engraving our words upon plates**. (*Book of Mormon*, Jacob 4:1)

Rev. M. T. Lamb observed:

If you turn over to the New Testament, what could be plainer or simpler, or more beautifully expressed than Christ's sermon on the mount. . . .

Read over Jesus' incomparable address to his disciples, on the eve of his apprehension and crucifixion, as recorded in the Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of John. Every sentence has the stamp of divinity upon it. . . . Dissect carefully that address, and find anywhere in it the word, or the phrase, or the sentence that is either unnecessary, useless or foolish; find one line that you can improve, . . .

"Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me." . . .

"Abide in me and I in you." etc., etc. . . .

Perhaps this point may be seen more clearly by reading in the Book of Mormon a few specimens from what purport to be Jesus' own words. The book tells us that Jesus . . . appeared here upon this continent . . . preaching to them the gospel of the kingdom. A large portion of his addresses, during this period, is made up of the sermon on the mount, and various other extracts from the four gospels. But he adds some new matter, enough to show how vast the chasm between what he said here upon this continent and what he said in the land of Judea, especially in the one point: *its comprehensiveness*. . . .

The first selection is a **single sentence**, a rather long one, and somewhat mixed in its construction, but nevertheless is recorded as an actual speech from the lips of him who spake as never man spake. [3 Nephi 21:2-7]

And behold, this is the thing which I will give unto you for a sign, for verily I say unto you, that when these things which I declare unto you and which I shall declare unto you hereafter of myself, and by the power of the Holy Ghost, which shall be given unto you of the Father, shall be made known unto the Gentiles, that they may know concerning this people, who are a remnant of the house of Jacob, and concerning this my people, who shall be scattered by them; verily, verily I say unto you, when these things shall be made known unto them of the Father, and shall come forth of the Father, from them unto you, for it is wisdom in the Father that they should be established in this land, and be set up as a free people by the power of the Father, that these things might come forth from them unto a remnant of your seed, that the covenant of the Father may be fulfilled which he has covenanted with his people, O house of Israel: therefore, when these works, and the works which shall be wrought among you hereafter, shall come forth from the Gentiles unto your seed, which shall dwindle in unbelief because of iniquity; for thus it behoveth the Father that it should come forth from the Gentiles, that he may show forth his power unto the Gentiles, for this cause, that the Gentiles, if they will not harden their hearts, that they may repent and come unto me, and be baptized in my name, and know of the true points of my doctrine, that they may be numbered among my people, O house of Israel; and when these things come to pass, that thy seed shall begin to know these things, it shall be a sign unto them, that they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced, unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the people who are of the house of Israel.

This sentence contains over 340 words. The words “that” and “which” are repeated twenty times; the words “I,” “my” and “me,” eleven times; the word “Father,” eight times; “Gentiles,” five times; the expression, “shall come forth,” four times. All this in one sentence. A very remarkable sentence surely. (*The Golden Bible, or The Book of Mormon. Is It From God?*, by M. T. Lamb, 1887, pp. 44-47)

This wordiness is seen throughout the Book of Mormon. Another example is 4 Nephi 1:6:

And thus did the thirty and eighth year pass away, and also the thirty and ninth, and forty and first, and the forty and second, yea, even until forty and nine years had passed away, and also the fifty and first, and the fifty and second; yea, and even until fifty and nine years had passed away.

Would an author be so long-winded if he was struggling to engrave on metal? If it was so hard to engrave the record, as Nephi’s brother Jacob complained, why didn’t the author just say “Fifty nine years had passed away”?

The redundancy in the Book of Mormon has even led one Mormon to propose a modern English version to make it easier to read. For example, Mosiah 18:30 reads:

And now it came to pass that all this was done in Mormon, yea, by the waters of Mormon, in the forest that was near the waters of Mormon; yea, the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer; yea, and how blessed are they, for they shall sing to his praise forever.

LDS author Timothy Wilson proposed the following condensation:

Mosiah 18:30 All this happened in the forest near the waters of Mormon, a beautiful place to those who there found their Redeemer. How blessed they are, for they will sing to His Praise forever. (“Translating ‘Book of Mormon’ to Modern English Brings Complexity, Controversy to Wordsmiths,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Nov. 28, 1992, p. D1)

Examples of such rambling sentences can be found throughout the book. Turn to the Words of Mormon, composed by the man who made “an abridgment from the plates of Nephi, down to the reign of this king Benjamin.” One would think that someone who had spent so much time condensing the record would be careful to make his own comments succinct. Here is an example of one of his longer sentences:

And it came to pass that after there had been false Christs, and their mouths had been shut, and they punished according to their crimes; and after there had been false prophets, and false preachers and teachers among the people, and all these having been punished according to

their crimes; and after there having been much contention and many dissensions away unto the Lamanites, behold, it came to pass that king Benjamin, with the assistance of the holy prophets who were among his people—for behold, king Benjamin was a holy man, and he did reign over his people in righteousness; and there were many holy men in the land, and they did speak the word of God with power and with authority; and they did use much sharpness because of the stiffneckedness of the people—wherefore, with the help of these, king Benjamin, by laboring with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul, and also the prophets, did once more establish peace in the land. (Words of Mormon 1:15-18)

While one can find long passages in the Bible those authors were not struggling to engrave on metal.

Besides the general wordiness of many passages themselves, one wonders why certain whole sections were even included in the first place. The Book of Mormon contains many chapters of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Sidney B. Sperry, a BYU professor, conceded “the Book of Mormon quotes twenty-one complete chapters of Isaiah and parts of others” (*Answers to Book of Mormon Questions*, by Sidney B. Sperry, Bookcraft, 1967, p. 73). Sperry gives the following references for the Isaiah quotes:

The Book of Mormon quotes from the following chapters of Isaiah: 2-14 (2 Nephi 12-24); 29 (2 Nephi 27); 48, 49 (1 Nephi 20, 21); 50, 51 (2 Nephi 7, 8); 52 (3 Nephi 20); 53 (Mosiah 14); 54 (3 Nephi 22); 55 (2 Nephi 26:25). (*Answers to Book of Mormon Questions*, p.80)

Nephi prefaces his addition of Isaiah 2-14 with this comment:

I write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men. Now these are the words, and ye may liken them unto you and unto all men. (2 Nephi 11:8)

Since the Nephites supposedly had the entire book of Isaiah on plates they brought from Jerusalem, why recopy them? Why would it be more likely for his people to see those words on his plates as opposed to reading the actual Isaiah record?

Another oddity is encountered at the end of the Book of Mormon. After the destruction of all the Nephites at approximately 400 A.D., Moroni, the last one to record on the plates, writes:

Behold I, Moroni, do finish the record of my father, Mormon. Behold, **I have but few things to write**, which things I have been commanded by my father.

And now it came to pass that after the great and tremendous battle at Cumorah, behold, the Nephites who

had escaped into the country southward were hunted by the Lamanites, until they were **all destroyed**.

And my father also was killed by them, and **I even remain alone** to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people. . . .

Therefore I will write and hide up the records in the earth; and whither I go it mattereth not.

Behold, my father hath made this record, and he hath written the intent thereof. And behold, **I would write it also if I had room upon the plates, but I have not; and ore I have none, for I am alone**. My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfold, and I have not friends nor whither to go; and how long the Lord will suffer that I may live I know not. (Mormon 8:1-5)

In spite of Moroni being alone and out of ore he continued to engrave on the plates, a text that would take another thirty pages of print, giving the account of the Jaredites who came to the New World at the time of the Tower of Babel, known as the book of Ether. Moroni wrote:

And now I, Moroni proceed to give an account of those ancient inhabitants who were destroyed by the hand of the Lord upon the face of this north country.

And I take mine account from the twenty and four plates . . . which is called the Book of Ether [the original record of the Jaredites].

And as I suppose that the first part of this record, which speaks concerning the creation of the world, and also of Adam, and an account from that time even to the great tower, and whatsoever things transpired among the children of men until that time, is had among the Jews—

Therefore I do not write those things which transpired from the days of Adam until that time; but they are had upon the plates; and whoso findeth them, the same will have power that he may get the full account.

But behold, **I give not the full account**, but a part of the account I give, from the tower down until they were destroyed. (Ether 1:2-5)

The odd part is that the twenty-four plates were supposed to cover hundreds of years of history. However, Moroni's abridgement of only the part from the Tower of Babel until the end of the Jaredites here in America takes thirty printed pages in the Book of Mormon. How condensed could their script have been? Moroni's abridgement must be longer than the original, which contained an account starting with Adam.

Add to this the problem that after the book of Ether, Moroni writes another whole book, all while being alone, hunted by the Lamanites and out of ore. At the beginning of this next record, Moroni writes:

Now I, Moroni, after having made an end of abridging the account of the people of Jared, **I had supposed not to have written more**, but I have not as yet perished; and I

make not myself known to the Lamanites lest they should destroy me.

For behold, their wars are exceedingly fierce among themselves; and because of their hatred they put to death every Nephite that will not deny the Christ.

And I, Moroni, will not deny the Christ; wherefore, **I wander whithersoever I can for the safety of mine own life**.

Wherefore, **I write a few more things, contrary to that which I had supposed**; for I had supposed not to have written any more; but I write a few more things, that perhaps they may be of worth unto my brethren, the Lamanites, in some future day, according to the will of the Lord. (Book of Moroni 1:1-4)

This is followed by chapters dealing with instructions for the church on ordination, the sacrament, baptism and church discipline. This ending is such a shift in emphasis that one wonders if Smith got to the end of his story and realized that he hadn't included enough information for the founding of a church.

Then Moroni copies into the record his father's sermon on "faith, hope, and charity," followed by two letters from Mormon (all of which seem to be admonitions based on phrasing from the KJV New Testament). In chapter ten Moroni finishes the record, for the second time, with the statement, "And I seal up these records, after I have spoken a few words by way of exhortation unto you," followed by two pages of spiritual thoughts (which again seem to be based on phrasing from Paul's epistles in the New Testament).

Does all this really sound plausible?

IDEA FOR PLATES AND STONE BOX

In reading about the plates of Darius a Mormon might get excited at seeing that they were stored in a stone box much like the one Smith described as storing the Book of Mormon plates. How would Joseph Smith know that ancient people used stone boxes? Researcher Dan Vogel found that in Smith's day there were reports of ancient stone boxes and records here in North America which could have given Smith his ideas:

Joseph Smith was certainly not the first to claim the discovery of a stone box, metal plates, or an Indian book. It was known that the Indians sometimes buried their dead in stone boxes similar to the one described by Joseph Smith. In 1820, for example, the *Archaeologia Americana* reported that human bones had been discovered in some mounds "enclosed in rude stone coffins." A similar stone box, described by John Haywood of Tennessee, was made by placing "four stones standing upright, and so placed in relation to each other, as to form a square or box, which

enclosed a skeleton.” Stone boxes of various sizes and shapes had reportedly been found in Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, New York, and other places.

According to various accounts, some of the North American mounds also contained metal plates. Plates constructed by the Indians were usually made of hammered copper or silver and were sometimes etched. Plates made of other metals were most likely of European manufacture. In 1775 Indian trader James Adair described two brass plates and five copper plates found with the Tuccabatches Indians of North America. According to Adair, an Indian informant said “he was told by his forefathers that those plates were given to them by the man we call God; that there had been many more of other shapes, . . . some had writing upon them which were buried with particular men.” . . .

Perhaps such discoveries of metal plates encouraged the persistent legend of a lost Indian book. The legend, as related by Congregational minister Ethan Smith [in his 1825 book, *View of the Hebrews*] of Poultney, Vermont, held that the Indians once had “a book which they had for a long time preserved. But having lost the knowledge of reading it, they concluded it would be of no further use to them; and they buried it with an Indian chief.” (*Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon*, by Dan Vogel, Signature Books, 1986, p. 18)

As mentioned by Dan Vogel, Congregational minister Ethan Smith, in the 1825 edition of *View of the Hebrews*, may have provided many of the ideas for Joseph’s story. Researcher George D. Smith observed:

In 1823, seven years before the Book of Mormon was published, Ethan Smith, had written *View of the Hebrews* a compilation of popular opinions about the origins of the American Indians, who supposedly descended from the Hebrew tribes. . . . Ethan Smith was a Congregational minister living in Poultney, Vermont, Oliver Cowdery’s home until 1825 when he moved west and met Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith’s own birthplace, Sharon, Vermont, was only 40 miles from Poultney. But *View of the Hebrews*, which was expanded in the 1825 edition, was also read widely in New York . . .

Ethan Smith had collected reports about the Hebrew origin of the Indians from missionaries and traders who had lived among them. . . . Josiah Priest . . . had published two books supporting the thesis. In *The Wonders of Nature and Providence Displayed* (editions printed in 1825 and 1826) he concluded, after quoting some forty writers, that most ministers of New England and the Middle States believed the Indians were descendants of the Hebrews. . . . Certainly then; these ideas about the origin of the Indians were widely circulated during the time and at the place Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon.

There are at least five themes found in *View of the Hebrews* (1825 edition) which have parallels in the Book of Mormon.

1. Ethan Smith, like Joseph Smith, believed that the American Indians descended from the ancient Hebrews. . . .
2. In both books savage tribes destroyed their civilized brethren in a final great battle. . . .
3. In both accounts, **sacred records**, handed down from generation to generation, were **buried in a hill** and then found years later. . . .
4. Both the *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon identify the American Indians as the “stick of Joseph or Ephraim,” the tribe of Joseph, which will be reunited with the stick of Judah, the Jews, as prophesied by Ezekiel (chapter 37). . . .
5. Both books inform Americans that they should convert the Indians to their Hebraic scriptural heritage. (“Book of Mormon Difficulties,” by George D. Smith, Jr., *Sunstone*, May 1981, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 45-46)

Another source for the idea of metal plates could have come from reading the popular Jewish historian, Josephus. In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, he mentioned “engraven” “public records” of “brass” (*Josephus: Complete Works*, Kregel Pub., ch. 10, p. 299). Also, the Apocrypha (published in many King James Bibles of Smith’s day) contained mention of metal records: “So then they wrote it in tables of brass” (KJV Apocrypha, I Maccabees 14:18, 27, 48).

A CAVE FULL OF PLATES?

Evidently all of the Nephite and Jaredite records were in the hill by Smith’s home in New York. According to Brigham Young, Oliver Cowdery had said there were wagonloads of plates in the hill:

“. . . I lived right in the country where the plates were found from which the Book of Mormon was translated, and I know a great many things pertaining to that country. I believe I will take the liberty to tell you of another circumstance that will be as marvelous as anything can be. This is an incident in the life of **Oliver Cowdery**, but he did not take the liberty of telling such things in meeting as I take . . . Oliver Cowdery went with the Prophet Joseph when he deposited **these plates**. Joseph did not translate all of the plates; there was **a portion of them sealed**, which you can learn from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants. When Joseph got the plates, the angel instructed him to carry them back to the hill Cumorah, which he did. **Oliver says that when Joseph and Oliver went there, the hill opened, and they walked into a cave, in which there was a large and spacious room.** He says he did not think, at the time, whether they had the light of the sun or artificial light; but that it was just as light as day. They laid the plates on a table; it was a large table that stood in the room. **Under this table there was a pile of plates as much as two feet high, and there were altogether in this room more**

plates than probably many wagon loads; they were piled up in the corners and along the walls. The first time they went there the sword of Laban hung upon the wall; but when they went again it had been taken down and laid upon the table across the gold plates; it was unsheathed, and on it was written these words, ‘This sword will never be sheathed again until the Kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and his Christ.’ I tell you this as coming not only from Oliver Cowdery, but others who were familiar with it, and who understood it just as well as we understood coming to this meeting, enjoying the day, . . .” (Sermon by Brigham Young, June 17, 1877, *Journal of Discourses* 19:38-39)

Since many BYU professors today maintain that the Book of Mormon story actually happened in southern Mexico and Guatemala, and that Moroni later took the plates to New York, one wonders how he transported all of the plates? Deanne Matheny commented on early means of transport:

Wheeled toys indicate that the principle of the wheel was known in some areas of Mesoamerica, but no evidence indicated that wheels were employed beyond this limited context. There were few domesticated animals and thus human porters constituted the primary means for transporting goods. (*New Approaches*, p. 276)

Further on she discusses the problem of horses as mentioned in the Book of Mormon:

References to horses are found throughout much of the chronological scope of the Book of Mormon, and in a number of instances horses are associated with chariots. (p. 305)

After discussing the lack of evidence for the horse in the Book of Mormon time frame, Matheny goes on to discuss the problems with suggesting

that the horses referred to in the Book of Mormon could have been deer or tapirs. . . . There is little evidence suggesting that tapirs ever have been tamed or used as beasts of burden. They are extremely shy, hiding in the forest by day and coming out at night to feed. Although adults weigh between 225 and 300 kilograms, they are short animals averaging about one meter in height which, even if domesticated for some purpose, seem unsuitable for riding No evidence has been offered that tapirs were being used for riding or to pull chariots or carts in pre-Columbian times or that they have been used to any extent for either purpose since the arrival of the Europeans. (*Ibid.*, pp. 306-307)

With no horses or wheeled carts in Mesoamerica prior to the arrival of Europeans, moving the huge amount of metal plates described by Oliver Cowdery from Mexico to New York seems impossible.

WOOD BOX FOR PLATES

Another problem is the size of the plates compared to the size of the box used for their storage. Joseph Smith described the plates as being 6x8x6 inches, but this would be too large to fit them in the box the LDS Church claims was used to store the record.

There is a picture of the box in an official LDS book, which states the box dimensions as being 14x16 inches with a depth of 6 1/4 inches sloping to 4 inches (*Church History in the Fulness of Times*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989, p. 44). Thus the lid could not have been shut.

Even if one goes with Martin Harris’ plate measurements of 7x8x4 inches you would still need to factor in the size of the three rings holding the plates together. They would have to extend to some degree above and below the plates to allow for turning the leaves. Again, the box is not deep enough to close the lid on plates four inches tall with rings.

WHO SAW THE PLATES?

While some of the statements made by the various witnesses to the Book of Mormon imply that they saw the plates with their natural eyes, other statements indicate that the viewing was actually in a vision. In fact, one Mormon gave up belief in the Book of Mormon when he heard Martin Harris state that the witnesses only saw the plates in a visionary state. Stephen Burnett related this event in a letter to Lyman E. Johnson on April 15, 1838:

I have reflected long and deliberately upon the history of this church & weighed the evidence for & against it—loth to give it up—but when I came to hear Martin Harris state in a public congregation that **he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination, neither Oliver [Cowdery] nor David [Whitmer] & also that the eight witnesses never saw them & hesitated to sign that instrument [their statement at the front of the Book of Mormon] for that reason, but were persuaded to do it, the last pedestal gave way, in my view our foundations was sapped & the entire superstructure fell a heap of ruins . . . M[artin] Harris arose & said he was sorry for any man who rejected the Book of Mormon for he knew it was true, he said he had hefted the plates repeatedly in a box with only a tablecloth or a handkerchief over them, but he never saw them only as he saw a city through a mountain.** And said that he never should have told that the testimony of the eight [witnesses] was false, if it had not been picked out of [h]im but should have let it passed as it was . . . (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, pp. 291-292)

It is assumed that Harris was saying that the eight witnesses did not see the plates with the natural eye but in a vision, not that they lied about their experience.

LDS scholar Marvin Hill discussed the issue of the plates and whether the witnesses physically saw the plates or only in a vision:

In the revelation given the three witnesses before they viewed the plates they were told, “it is by your **faith** that you shall view them” and “ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith Jr. has seen them, for it is **by my power that he has seen them.**” There is testimony from several independent interviewers, all non-Mormon, that Martin Harris and David Whitmer said they saw the plates with their “**spiritual eyes**” only. Among others, A. Metcalf and John Gilbert, as well as Reuben P. Harmon and Jesse Townsend, gave testimonies to this effect. This is contradicted, however, by statements like that of David Whitmer in the *Saints Herald* in 1882, “these hands handled the plates, these eyes saw the angel.” But Z. H. Gurley elicited from Whitmer a not so positive response to the question, “did you touch them?” His answer was, “**We did not touch nor handle the plates.**” Asked about the table on which the plates rested, Whitmer replied, “the table had the appearance of literal wood as shown in the **visions** of the glory of God.” . . .

So far as the eight witnesses go, **William Smith said his father never saw the plates except under a frock.** And Stephen Burnett quotes Martin Harris that “**the eight witnesses never saw them** & hesitated to sign that instrument [their testimony published in the Book of Mormon] for that reason, but were persuaded to do it.” Yet John Whitmer told Wilhelm Poulson of Ovid, Idaho, in 1878 that he saw the plates when they were not covered, and he turned the leaves. Hiram Page, another of the eight witnesses, left his peculiar testimony in a letter in the *Ensign of Liberty* in 1848:

As to the Book of Mormon, it would be doing injustice to myself and to the work of God of the last days, to say that I could know a thing to be true in 1830, and know the same thing to be false in 1847. To say my mind was so treacherous that I have forgotten **what I saw**, to say that a man of Joseph’s ability, who at that time did not know how to pronounce the word Nephi, could write a book of six hundred pages, as correct as the Book of Mormon without supernatural power. And to say that those **holy Angels who came and showed themselves to me** as I was walking through the field, to confirm me in the work of the Lord of the last days—three of whom came to me afterwards and sang an hymn in their own pure language; yes, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt, to deny these testimonies.

With only a veiled reference to “what I saw,” Page does not say he saw the plates but that **angels** confirmed

him in his faith. Neither does he say that any coercion was placed upon him to secure his testimony. Despite Page’s inconsistencies, it is difficult to know what to make of **Harris’ affirmation that the eight saw no plates** in the face of John Whitmer’s testimony. The original testimony of these eight men in the Book of Mormon reads **somewhat ambiguously**, not making clear whether they handled the **plates** or the “leaves” of the **translated manuscript**. Thus there are some puzzling aspects to the testimonies of the witnesses. (“Brodie Revisited: A Reappraisal,” by Marvin S. Hill, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 83-85)

Further reinforcing the position that the eight witnesses never saw the actual plates, except for a possible vision, is the following statement of Martin Harris:

These plates were usually kept in a cherry box made for that purpose in the possession of Joseph and myself. The plates were kept from the sight of the world, and **no one, save Oliver Cowdery, myself, Joseph Smith, Jr., and David Whitmer, ever saw them.** (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 306)

Even though Harris says the three witnesses saw the plates, he obviously is still referring to a vision. In 1840 John A. Clark, pastor of Palmyra’s Zion’s Episcopal Church in the mid-1820’s, gave the following account of Martin Harris seeing the plates:

A gentleman in Palmyra, bred to the law, a professor of religion, and of undoubted veracity told me that on one occasion, he appealed to Harris and asked him directly, —“Did you *see* those plates?” Harris replied, he did. “Did you see the plates, and the engraving on them with your bodily eyes?” Harris replied, “Yes, I saw them with my eyes,—**they were shown unto me by the power of God and not of man.**” “But did you see them with your natural,—your bodily eyes, just as you see this pencil-case in my hand? Now say *no* or *yes* to this.” Harris replied,—“Why I did **not** see them as I do that pencil-case, yet I saw them with the **eye of faith**; I saw them just as distinctly as I see any thing around me,—**though at the time they were covered over with a cloth.**” (*Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 270)

Thus it appears that only Joseph Smith could claim to see the plates with the natural eye.

WERE THE PLATES EVEN NEEDED?

LDS illustrations of Joseph Smith translating the plates usually show him bent over the plates as he tried to decipher the characters. However, it appears Smith didn’t even need to look at the plates to do his translation.

Joseph's wife, Emma, described the process to her son:

In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, after sitting by the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us. . . . The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, **wrapped in a small linen table cloth**, which I had given him to fold them in. (Statement of Emma Smith, *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, p. 541)

In 1834 Emma's father, Isaac Hale, gave a similar description of the translation process:

. . . I went to the house where Joseph Smith Jr., lived, and where he and Harris were engaged in their translation of the Book. . . . I told them then, that I considered the whole of it a delusion, and advised them to abandon it. The manner in which he [Smith] pretended to read and interpret, was the same as when he looked for the money-diggers, with the **stone in his hat**, and his hat over his face, **while the Book of Plates were at the same time hid in the woods!** (Isaac Hale Statement, *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, p. 287)

LaMar Petersen, author and historian, observed:

The church has always been strongly committed to the belief that Joseph translated directly from the plates, but at least one modern LDS scholar, Nels L. Nelson, a professor at Brigham Young University, concluded otherwise: "Joseph Smith did not look directly at the plates while translating. In fact the plates, while they were in the possession of the Prophet, were probably not immediately at hand with him during most of the translation." (*Creation of the Book of Mormon: A Historical Inquiry*, by LaMar Petersen, Freethinker Press, 2000, p. 96)

Since Joseph Smith simply read the translation off the stone in his hat it would have been irrelevant whether the plates were in the room or in the woods. David Whitmer described the process of translation:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph would put the **seer stone into a hat**, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. **One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English.** Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man. (*An Address To All Believers in Christ*, by David Whitmer, 1887, p. 12)

After Smith finished his translation, the plates were returned to the angel. Smith stated:

But by the wisdom of god, they [the plates] remained safe in my hands, until I had accomplished by them what was required at my hand. When, according to arrangements, the messenger called for them, I delivered them up to him; and he has them in his charge until this day, being the second day of May, one thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight. (*History of the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 18-19)

URIM AND THUMMIM OR SEER STONE?

In the Book of Mormon we read that a "seer" has the ability to

translate all records that are of ancient date: and it is a gift from God. And the things are called **interpreters**, and no man can look in them except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he ought not and he should perish. (Mosiah 8:13, *Book of Mormon*)

Smith claimed that the angel informed him these "interpreters" were with the plates:

While I was thus in the act of calling upon God, . . . a personage appeared at my bedside, . . . He said there was a book deposited, written upon **gold plates**, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. . . . Also, that there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the **Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates**; and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted "seers" in ancient or former times; and that **God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book.** (Joseph Smith—History 1:35, *Pearl of Great Price*)

Even though God had reportedly preserved the Urim and Thummim, or interpreters, for centuries and had them buried with the plates to insure their translation, Joseph only used them for the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, which were lost by Martin Harris. All of the present Book of Mormon was evidently translated by use of the seer stone found in Chase's well.

LDS historian Andrew Jensen reported a speech given by Martin Harris in Salt Lake City on Sunday, September 4, 1870:

He [Martin Harris] related an incident which occurred during the time that he wrote that portion of the translation of the Book of Mormon which he was favored to write direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and said that

the Prophet possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and **for convenience he then used the seer stone.** . . .

Martin said further that the seer stones differed in appearance entirely from the Urim and Thummim obtained with the plates, which were two clear stones set in two rims, very much resembling spectacles, only they were larger. (*Historical Record*, by Andrew Jensen, vol. 7, p. 216)

One assumes that the “convenience” of using his stone was due to size. A stone could be carried in one’s pocket and would fit in a hat easier than large spectacles.

Here we are presented with the peculiar situation of a rock found in a well which works just as well as God’s specially prepared “interpreters” and is more convenient!

This year the LDS Church has a special display at their Church Museum of different Joseph Smith artifacts. They even have a mockup of the gold plates. However, they have not chosen to display any of Joseph Smith’s seer stones. D. Michael Quinn related the following concerning Smith’s various stones:

In more recent years, Grant Palmer [three-time director of LDS Institutes of Religion in California and Utah] was “shown by Earl Olson” the three “seer stones in First Presidency Vault.” The first was “milk chocolate [in color], like a baseball [in shape, with] no stripes.” Different from the descriptions of the founding prophet’s dark-colored Book of Mormon seer stone, this first stone’s origin and chain-of-ownership are unknown (at least outside the LDS Presidency’s office). The second was “shiny or polished stone, [with] stripes, dark brown [—] size between egg and handball.” . . . The only description Palmer gave for the third was that it was a “small stone.” . . . While the First Presidency’s secretary told Mary Brown Firmage Woodward that there were three seer stones in the presidency’s vault, she saw only one. Grant Palmer saw all three.

The brown and white stones are the only seer stones Joseph Smith definitely used, yet he acquired others as church president. Young told the apostles in 1855 that Smith had five seer stones. . . .

Young’s statement makes it clear that Smith did not regard his seer stones simply as relics of his youth. Rather, as church president Smith continued to discover new seer stones. (*Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, p. 245- 246)

Since one of these stones was used to translate all of the published Book of Mormon, one wonders why it wasn’t included in the display? Could it be that the current prophet is embarrassed by the very instrument used to produce LDS scripture?

Richard Bushman, in trying to sort out the problems of Smith’s later work on the Book of Abraham, concluded that both the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham

came through revelation, not through standard methods of the scholar looking at an ancient text:

. . . the discovery [of the Egyptian papyri in 1967] prompted a reassessment of the Book of Abraham. What was going on while Joseph “translated” the papyri and dictated text to a scribe? Obviously, he was not interpreting the hieroglyphics like an ordinary scholar. As Joseph saw it, he was working by inspiration—that had been clear from the beginning. When he “translated” the Book of Mormon, he did not read from the gold plates; he looked into the crystals of the Urim and Thummim or gazed at the seerstone. The words came by inspiration, not by reading the characters on the plates. By analogy, it seemed likely that the papyri had been an occasion for receiving a revelation rather than a word-for-word interpretation of the hieroglyphs as in ordinary translations. Joseph translated Abraham as he had the characters on the gold plates, by knowing the meaning without actually knowing the plates’ language. (*Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 192)

Thus we see that Joseph Smith found the plates by using his magic stone, then used that stone, instead of the instrument prepared by God, to receive an inspired translation of records he didn’t even need to see. Additionally, the witnesses seem to have only seen the plates in some sort of vision.

SUMMARY

All of these issues added together show the utter implausibility of Smith’s claim of finding a set of metal plates in New York containing an account of the “former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang.” The problems discussed in this newsletter, plus many others that are detailed in the various books cited, show that the Book of Mormon is a product of the nineteenth century, not a record of ancient people.

Some have suggested that the book does not need to be historical, that it could be seen as an inspired allegory. However, it is presented to the world as a real account of actual people who inhabited ancient America. The allegory theory fails to explain the many visits of Angel Moroni, who claimed to be the Nephite who hid the plates in the hill. What was Smith carrying as he ran through the woods in 1827? Why did Smith need a box for the plates if they are only allegorical? What is to be made of the various statements of hefting the plates?

This theory would require Smith to make some sort of prop, which is always kept covered, to have people feel and heft in order to get them to believe his story. This would place Smith in the position of either being deluded or lying.

LDS Apostle Jeffrey Holland observed:

To consider that everything of saving significance in the Church stands or falls on the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and, by implication, the Prophet Joseph Smith's account of how it came forth is as sobering as it is true. It is a "sudden death" proposition. Either the Book of Mormon is what the Prophet Joseph said it is, or this Church and its founder are false, a deception from the first instance onward. . . . Joseph Smith must be accepted either as a prophet of God or else as a charlatan of the first order . . . (Jeffrey Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant*, Deseret Book, 1997, pp. 345-47; as quoted by BYU professor Robert Millett, http://www.byui.edu/Presentations/Transcripts/Devotionals/2004_01_27_Millet.htm)

In 1981, the LDS Church expanded the title of the Nephite record to "The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ." However, if the Book of Mormon is not an actual historical document it would not serve the purpose of being further evidence of Jesus beyond what we have in the Bible.

(**Bold** emphasis in the quotes was added and did not appear in the books referenced.)

EXCERPTS FROM EMAILS

May 2005. Thank You for your web site, it has been of great help. I have been a member of the LDS church for a few years and now I want to leave.

May 2005. YOUR JUST A TYPICAL RUN OF THE MILL ANTI-MORMON GROUP. IF YOU BELIEVE SO MUCH IN HONESTY, WHY DON'T YOU JUST PUT "ANTI-MORMON GROUP" AS YOUR HEADING. AT LEAST THIS WAY PEOPLE CAN KNOW WHAT YOUR REALLY ALL ABOUT.

June 2005. . . . I joined the LDS church with my family when I was 5 years old. In my 23 years, I have not been able to come to a valid conclusion on WHY people find it necessary to insult and defame the LDS church. What you don't understand is that "MORMONS" are just as Christian as you are? We follow and believe and love Jesus Christ with all of our hearts.

June 2005. . . . I have just begun a journey to seek the truth behind Mormonism. . . . I am trying to build up the courage to show my wife the things that I have discovered and I am hoping to find enough solid material to at least plant the seed of doubt . . . that which will allow her to question things herself.

June 2005. . . . God is doing a wonderful thing through lighthouse ministries. . . . When it comes to dealing with LDS I do not use any other source. Your ministry played a part in my leaving the LDS church back in 1989. I beleave you probably have no Idea how many have come to know Jesus after contacting lighthouse ministries :-)

June 2005. Yesterday I received one of my favorite pieces of mail—the Salt Lake City Messenger! You deserve a great deal of credit for your unflinching devotion to spreading the truth, and right in Salt Lake City, the nerve center of what has become an enormously wealthy and powerful international organization.

[I was a] BYU student of Mormon history . . . The modern LDS establishment holds little in common with the church begun by Joseph Smith, and no doubt he would be promptly excommunicated today. How shockingly little Mormons know about their own religion and its history! . . .

Look at the bright side, at least the Mormons appear to have given up the practice of using blood atonement against their enemies!

June 2005. Your book, "The Changing World of Mormonism" was like a very strong cup of coffee, hard to swallow at first, but it opened my eyes wide. I was born and raised in the mormon church, my family are mormon pioneers on both sides.

June 2005. I too, amongst many, have come from a Mormon background and have received Jesus Christ as my personal savior. I commend you for your faithfulness in your endeavors and I praise God that He has given and provided you with fortitude and strength to deliver these people out of darkness and into the light. Truth does withstand scrutiny.

July 2005. I am an ex-Mormon, who left over three years ago. My husband, children and I had our records removed last year. The freedom I have felt is indescribable. After reading your testimonies, I know you both feel that freedom, too. We just couldn't stay that far away from God anymore. We needed the true Jesus of the Bible in our lives.

July 2005. I am curious to know if it is just my faith that you pull to pieces, or whether you evenly destroy all faiths? . . . You should be ashamed of yourselves, if this is what you do to a christian faith. . . . Where does your priesthood ordinances stem from? . . . When did you pray to God to ask him about each faith you studied? Did you ask him about Joseph Smith and his testimony? No.

July 2005. WHY DON'T YOU ALL GO OUT AND GET A "REAL JOB" INSTEAD OF RUNNING DOWN SOMEONES RELIGION. I MEAN THERE MUST BE SOMETHING CONSTRUCTIVE YOU CAN DO.

August 2005. Okay, I'm a total wimp. I know in my heart that the LDS Church is not true, and that Jesus is the "fullness of the gospel." It feels so wonderful to be free from bondage! And drink coffee again. . . . I am also admittedly not yet ready to take that final step of having my name removed from the records.

September 2005. Hello guys. . . . thank you, thank you and thank you for the awesome work that you guys have done over the years. You guys helped me greatly in the process of dispersing the dark cloud of Mormonism from my life.

October 2005. Clearly, you have never read the Book of Mormon. It is sad to me that in your ignorance, which is your fault, you are teaching the world false things about the Mormon beliefs. The mormons do not view themselves as better than the rest of the world, but yes, our church is the only true church.

NEW BOOK OF MORMON FILM

We are pleased to announce that Living Hope Ministries, producers of the film *DNA vs. The Book of Mormon*, have just released their new video entitled *The Bible vs. The Book of Mormon*. The following is taken from their Fall 2005 brochure:

After two years, six trips and nearly 40 interviews, it is with great joy that we announce that our latest video production, *The Bible vs. The Book of Mormon*, is complete! . . .

Many LDS leaders have stated that if the Book of Mormon is not true, then the Mormon Church is not true, or words to that effect. Similarly, we as Christians can make the same assertion—if the Bible is not true, then our faith is meaningless. . . . Is there any evidence to establish the truth or falsehood of either of them?

The Bible vs. The Book of Mormon asks two simple questions of both books: First, are they historically true? Secondly, and more to the point—can they be considered scripture? (*The Field Worker*, Fall 2005)

In making this film, Scott Johnson and Joel Kramer traveled to Jerusalem to visit different sites mentioned in the Bible and to interview scholars such as noted biblical archaeologist Gabriel Barkay. They later traveled to Great Britain to interview a number of experts in biblical languages and textual criticism, both at the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) and Oxford University, specifically on the subject of the textual history of the Bible, and its historical reliability.

Last year they traveled to Guatemala, Honduras, and southern Mexico, and spoke with several archaeologists and anthropologists, such as Thomas Murphy, looking for any evidence of an Israelite migration as described in the Book of Mormon.

They found that “the civilizations that existed in Mesoamerica were truly amazing, but bore no resemblance to those described in the Book of Mormon. The archaeology of the New World contradicts the Book of Mormon outright, in just about every possible way.”

This well done, professional video will be a great tool to use when talking to LDS friends and family. We highly recommend it. For special offers to receive this video free, see the back page of this newsletter.

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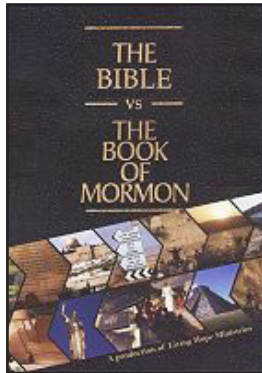
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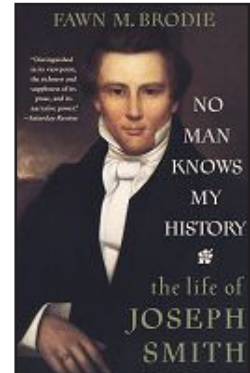
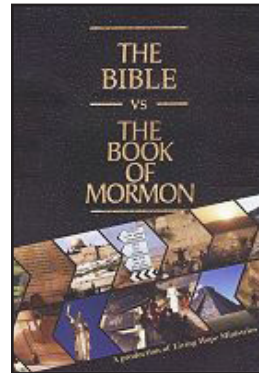
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