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Notes on the Book of Mormon I

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Abstract: This series discusses the gold plates, the burial of the plates at the Hill Cumorah, the Urim and Thummim, the characters on the plates, Joseph Smith's preparation for translation, the scribes, and manuscripts. The first part discusses the physical characteristics of the plates.

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF MORMON

BY J. M. SJODAHL

I.

THE PLATES—THE CHARACTERS

On September 22, 1827, the original plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated were delivered to the Prophet Joseph Smith by the angel Moroni, the resurrected messenger from God, who had charge of that marvelous literary work.

The Plates. Those plates had the appearance of gold, and are, therefore, generally called "the golden plates." They were about eight inches in length and seven in width. Fastened together with three rings, they formed a volume about four inches thick. Each plate was somewhat thinner than "common tin."

Number and Weight of the Plates. Some critics of the Book of Mormon have asserted that the dimensions of the plates and the thickness of the volume, as given, do not allow for a sufficient number of plates to contain the entire text of the book; and that a sufficient number of such gold plates of the dimensions and thickness given would be too heavy for any man to handle.

The Rev. M. T. Lamb, for instance, in his *The Golden Bible*, comes to the conclusion that the plates the Prophet Joseph had could, on the most liberal estimate possible, contain only from one-third to one-eighth of the text printed in the English version.

He accepts the statement that the volume was 7x8 inches and four inches thick. Then he allows fifty plates to an inch, making two hundred plates in all. But, he says, the Prophet did not translate more than one-third of that number, the rest being sealed. That is, he translated only 66 or 67 of the 200 plates. But the text in the American edition covers 563 pages, and at least an equal number of pages would have been required for the Hebrew or Egyptian text. Consequently, he says, it is impossible that the Book of Mormon could have been translated from the plates Joseph had, and he infers that the Prophet did not have any plates at all.

Others have asserted that if the Prophet had a volume, such as that claimed to have been in his possession, it would have weighed about five hundred pounds, or more, and, consequently, been too unwieldy to carry and handle, as represented. The inference again is, of course, that the prophet did not have any plates.

1: What are the facts, as far as known, concerning the size and number of the plates?

David Whitmer, in an interview in the *Kansas City Journal*, said of the plates shortly before his death:

"They appeared to be of gold, about six by nine inches in size, about

as thick as parchment, a great many in number, and bound together like the leaves of a book by massive rings passing through the edges."^a

Martin Harris, according to *Myth of the Manuscript Found*,^b estimated the plates at eight by seven inches, and the thickness of the volume at four inches, each plate being as thick as thick tin.

Orson Pratt did not see the plates himself, but his intimacy with the Prophet and the other eye witnesses lends great weight to his testimony regarding any question of fact on which he speaks. He tells us that the plates were eight by seven inches, and that the entire volume was about six inches in thickness, while each plate was about as thick as common tin.

Such are the statements that have come down to us regarding the dimensions of the plates. The variations are really slight, and easily accounted for. No measurements were taken at the time the plates were seen. The measurements given are but estimates made many years afterwards, in answer to questions pressed upon them in the course of what amounted almost to cross examination. The witnesses give, therefore, their individual estimates and nothing more. And the essential agreement and the slight variations both are strong presumptive evidence of the truth of the testimony, the variations confirming the statements by proving absence of collusion.

The question now is, Could one-third of a volume^c of metal leaves 8x7x4 inches (Martin Harris), or 8x7x6 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, in the original language in which it was engraved?

The illustration which appeared in the April, 1923, number of the *Improvement Era*, pages 542 and 543, is a complete answer to that question.

It is a facsimile of a sheet of paper, 8x7 inches, upon which a Hebrew translation of fourteen pages of the American text of the Book of Mormon have been written in the modern square, Hebrew letters in common use. The translation was made by Mr. Henry Miller, a Hebrew by birth, thoroughly versed in the language of his fathers, and a member of the Church. On this sheet he has demonstrated that the entire text of the Book of Mormon, as the American readers have it, could have been written in Hebrew on 40 and a fraction pages—21 plates in all, 8x7 inches.

The accompanying illustration is equally striking. It is a reproduction of a translation of seven pages of the American text of the Book of Mormon, also by Brother Miller, but written in the Phonician or old Israelitic characters, which were in use at the time of Lehi. It proves that even if written in these larger characters, the entire book required only 80 and a fraction pages—41 plates in all.

^aThis is quoted from *The Prophet of Palmyra*, and may or may not be authentic.

^bAn excellent little book by George Reynolds.

^cTwo-thirds being sealed.

volume was four inches thick, one-third, or even one-fourth—fifty plates—would furnish ample space for the entire text engraved in large, legible characters.^e

2. What are the facts as to the weight of such a volume?

Thirty-five twenty-dollar gold pieces would about cover a surface 8x7 inches. To make a column four inches high, forty-eight such pieces would be needed. Consequently, 35 times 48 twenty-dollar gold pieces, or 1,680 in all, would make up the dimensions of the entire volume, 8x7x4 inches. But a twenty-dollar gold piece weighs, as I am informed, 21½ pennyweights. That would make a total of 123 pounds avoirdupois, if my figures are correct.

But from this total liberal deductions must be made. The plates were not fine gold. The plates of Nephi were made of "ore," and Moroni also mentions "ore" as the material of which his plates were made (1 Nephi 19:1; Morm. 8:5.). The ore—possibly a copper alloy—must have had considerably less weight than the 23-karat gold of which gold coins are made. Then, again, we cannot suppose that the plates fitted so closely together as gold coins stacked in columns. There must have been some space between each pair, especially if, as is possible, they were hammered^f and not cast. Furthermore, an allowance must be made for the metal cut away by the engraver from both sides of each plate. Everything considered, the volume must have weighed considerably less than a hundred pounds, even on the supposition that the dimensions given are accurate and not mere approximations.

But since it has been shown that the entire text could have been engraved on 45 plates, let us suppose that it was not quite four inches in thickness, and that it contained, including the 2/3 sealed part, 135, instead of 200 plates; then the weight would be a fraction over 83 pounds, and with the deductions required not over 50 pounds. The Prophet Joseph could easily have handled a volume of that weight.

But is it absolutely certain that he had charge of the entire volume? The three witnesses were shown the volume, not by Joseph Smith but by an angel from heaven, and they so testify. The eight witnesses, to whom the Prophet Joseph showed the record, testify thus: "As many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon." A natural inference from this would be that the Prophet did not show them the sealed part. Orson Pratt says:

"You recollect that when the Book of Mormon was translated from

^eThe first edition of the Book of Mormon has 590 pages, 12:mo. The first European edition, Liverpool, 1841, reprinted from the second American edition, has 634 pages. The third American edition printed in Nauvoo, 1840, has 571 pages; the second European edition, Liverpool, 1849, has 563 pages. The American edition of 1912 has 522 pages.

^fComp. Ex. 39:3: "And they did beat the gold into thin plates."

the plates, about two-thirds were sealed up, and Joseph was commanded not to break the seal; that part of the record was hid up."^g

If this means that the sealed part was hidden somewhere while the translation of the other part was in progress, and if Orson Pratt was correctly informed on that point, then the Prophet Joseph had charge only of the unsealed part, which he translated and which he showed the eight witnesses. There can, then, be no question whatever of the enormous weight of the plates. The record which Joseph had in his possession was not heavier than he, who was unusually strong, physically as well as mentally, could lift and handle as required.^h

Similar Objections to the Bible. At one time similar objections were urged against the Old Testament description of the furniture in the Tabernacle. Moses tells us that Bezaleel made an ark, or box, of wood, in which the Law was deposited. It was overlaid, we read, with pure gold "within and without." The cover of this box was a lid of pure gold (Ex. 25:17; 37:6), $2\frac{1}{2}$ cubits long and $1\frac{1}{2}$ cubits wide. That is, it was an immense gold plate, 4 feet 3 inches by 2 feet 7 inches, or about 11 square feet. On this lid two cherubs were placed, one at each end. These figures were hammered of pure gold. Their wings overshadowed the lid and must, consequently, have been of considerable size. The box, we are told, was carried by priests before the camp of Israel during the wanderings in the wilderness. Some critics used to say that this was impossible. The box, the solid gold lid, the gold statues, the stone tables, all formed a burden too heavy to handle without machinery. But that kind of criticism is obsolete, whether applied to the Bible or the Book of Mormon.

Metal Plates not Unknown Anciently. Greeks and Romans anciently used ivory tablets, and, more frequently, wooden tablets, beech or fir. These were sometimes coated over with wax, and the record was made with a sharp instrument called stylus. Two or more such tablets might be joined together by means of wire rings, as were the Book of Mormon plates. Parchment made of skins of animals was a favorite material for important records, and vellum, or calf skin, was common in early days. Papyrus was in common use, especially among the Romans, until toward the end of the 9th century, paper made from the cotton plant was substituted. But engraving on metal plates was also known anciently. In Ex. 39:39 we read that the High Priest wore a gold plate on his crown, on which certain words were engraved, and Jeremiah has this notable expression: "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their hearts." (Jer. 17:1.) That proves beyond a question that the Israelites in the days of Jeremiah were acquainted with the art of

^gJour. of Dis., vol. 3, p. 347.

^hHistory of the Prophet Joseph, by Lucy Smith, pp. 85 and 105. The incident told must have been related by the Prophet himself.

making records by means of engraving on tablets of some hard substance, since otherwise the words, "table of their hearts," would have been unintelligible. In this connection it can be mentioned that the newspapers on Feb. 21, 1927, reported that copper plates had been found in Georgia, near the Etowah mound, by Dr. Warren K. Moorehead, of Andover, Mass.

Partly Sealed. As noted in a previous paragraph, part of the volume was sealed and inaccessible to the translator. Orson Prattⁱ says two-thirds. That part, we are told, contained an account of those great things which were shown to the brother of Jared (Ether 3:25-38), and also the revelations given to John, the beloved, on Patmos.^j The promise is given that "When the people of the Lord are prepared and found worthy, the sealed portion will be unfolded unto them."

In My Play

Not as I labor from sun to sun,
To finish the tasks of the day begun,
Not as I toil for a daily wage,
In a round of years, from youth to age;

Not as you watch my constancy,
Shall you be the judge of the best of me,
For my work, designed and circumscribed,
Is planned for me and paid and bribed.

Be it crude or skilled or commonplace,
To a ticking clock I set my pace,
And my loyalty may be servitude,
As I bend my arts to a livelihood.

It is my play, in my leisure hours,
That I burst my bands and divert my powers;
It is there that I enter false or true,
To match my good or my bad with you;

It is there that I score for pride or shame,
As I tally square or foul the game,
My best, my worst is released and free,
And I play debased or gloriously!

Mesa, Arizona.

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ⁱ*Jour. of Dis.*, vol. 3, p. 347.

^jLetter by Oliver Cowdery to *Messenger and Advocate*, Feb., 1835; *Millennial Star*, vol. 1, p. 44.