



Type: Book Chapter

---

## Hiding Records in Boxes

Author(s): John A. Tvedtnes

Source: *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Records: "Out of Darkness unto Light"*

Published: Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2000

Page(s): 31–57

---



The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) existed as a California non-profit corporation from 1979 until about 2006, when it was allowed to go into involuntary liquidation, at which time copyrights held by FARMS and its authors and/or editors reverted or may have reverted back to their original author and/or editors. This chapter is archived by permission of author John A. Tvedtnes.

## *H*iding Records in Boxes

*I looked in, and there indeed did I behold the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate, as stated by the messenger. The box in which they lay was formed by laying stones together in some kind of cement. In the bottom of the box were laid two stones crossways of the box, and on these stones lay the plates and the other things with them. (JS—H 1:52)*

Visitors to the spot where Joseph Smith retrieved the gold plates confirmed his account of the box in which Moroni had hidden them. David Whitmer, in an interview with P. Wilhelm Poulson in 1878, said, “I saw the place where the plates were found, and a great many did so, and it awakened an excitement at the time, because the worst enemies of ‘Mormonism’ stirred up the confusion by telling about the plates which Joseph found, and the ‘gold bible’ which he was in possession of, so he was in constant danger of being robbed and killed.” Poulson asked, “How did the place look?” Whitmer replied, “It was a stone box, and the stones looked to me as if they were cemented together. That was on the side of the hill, and a little down from the top.”<sup>1</sup>

In the early morning hours of 22 September 1827, as Joseph prepared to return to the hill to recover the plates buried by Moroni, he asked his mother if she had a chest with a lock and key. Seeing her anxiety, he told her, “Never mind, I can do very well for the present without it.”<sup>2</sup> Later that morning he asked her about having a chest made, whereupon she told him of a cabinetmaker who could perform the task.<sup>3</sup> Still later, Joseph sent his younger brother Don Carlos to ask Hyrum, another brother, to get a chest with lock and key and have it ready for his return with the plates, which he had hidden in a decayed birch log about three miles from the family home.<sup>4</sup> By the time Joseph returned to the house with the plates, which were wrapped in his linen frock, Hyrum had emptied a wooden chest and brought it to his parents’ home. Joseph locked the plates inside the chest at that time.<sup>5</sup> Later on, the breastplate containing the interpreters was also kept in the chest.<sup>6</sup>

As he was bringing the plates home, Joseph was attacked by men who sought to take them from him because of the value of the metal, which had “the appearance of gold.”<sup>7</sup> While he had custody of the plates, Joseph took precautions to protect the plates by hiding them in various places: in a hollow carved out of a decaying tree, beneath the hearth, in a pile of flax, and in a box hidden inside a cask filled with beans.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph’s wish to keep the plates in a box may have been inspired by the stone box in which Moroni had hidden the plates some fourteen centuries earlier. He may also have had in mind a vision in which his father, Joseph Smith Sr., was shown a box, the contents of which he was to eat in order to gain wisdom.<sup>9</sup> The plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated were not the first sacred text known to have been kept in a box. A large number of documents and archaeological discoveries confirm the antiquity of the practice, which predated Moroni

by many centuries. Records were kept in arks and foundation stones, as well as in boxes made of stone, metal, and earthenware.

### **The Ark of the Covenant**

The ark of the covenant constructed in Moses' day was the first box used in ancient Israel to house relics and sacred records. According to Hebrews 9:4, it held "the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant." That the tables of the law were kept in the ark is confirmed in Deuteronomy 10:1–5 and 1 Kings 8:9 (= 2 Chronicles 5:10).

The ark evidently held other records as well, for we read in Deuteronomy 31:26 that the Lord told Moses, "Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee." In the introduction to his *Mishneh Torah*, the twelfth-century Jewish rabbi Maimonides commented on Deuteronomy 31:26. He noted that Moses had inscribed thirteen copies of the Pentateuch, then delivered one to each of the twelve tribes of Israel and placed the master copy in the ark.<sup>10</sup> *Petirat Mosheh*, recounting the same story, notes that the angel Gabriel took this thirteenth scroll and brought it to the heavenly court. It there became the scroll from which the souls of the pious read.<sup>11</sup>

Commenting on the biblical story of the ark as the cause of the collapse of the Philistine god Dagon (see 1 Samuel 5:1–7), St. Ephraim Syrus, in the third of his *Hymns on the Nativity*, suggested that it was the book hidden in the ark that was the cause of the miracle.<sup>12</sup> A number of early traditions indicate that the ark itself was subsequently hidden away for later recovery—a topic discussed in chapter 6, "Hiding Sacred Relics."<sup>13</sup>



An ancient text known as the *Damascus Document* (CD V, 2–5), copies of which were discovered in both the genizah of the Old Cairo synagogue in Egypt<sup>14</sup> and among the Dead Sea Scrolls, confirms that the written law of Moses was kept in the ark: “However, David had not read the sealed book of the law which was in the ark, for it had not been opened in Israel since the day of the death of Eleazar and of Jehoshua, and Joshua and the elders who worshipped Ashtaroth had hidden the public (copy) until Zadok’s entry into office” as high priest in David’s day.<sup>15</sup>

Some scholars have suggested that the *Damascus Document* refers not to the ark of the covenant, but to another sealed box (the word “ark” means simply “box”). Ben Zion Wacholder has noted that *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Deuteronomy 31:26 “refers to an additional container” and that an early rabbi, Judah ben Laqish, recorded in Tosefta *Sotah* 7:18 that there were two arks, “one of which contained a *sepher torah* [Pentateuch] and the other of which preserved the broken fragments of the original law-tablets.”<sup>16</sup>

Samaritan tradition also reports that records were kept in the ark. One Samaritan document (BM 1732A)<sup>17</sup> says that Moses copied “the holy Torah from the book which was written by the finger of God” and “opened the Ark of Testimony and he placed the Book of the Law, which was written by the finger of God in it, by the side of the two Tablets upon which were engraven the Ten Words,<sup>18</sup> and placed upon the Ark the covering (kaporet) which no one could lift from the Ark up to this very day.”<sup>19</sup> The Samaritan *Chronicle Adler* notes that the priest Eli (known from the Bible as the one who raised the prophet Samuel) “made for himself an ark of gold, wherein he placed the books written in the handwriting of his ancestor, our lord Ithamar.”<sup>20</sup>

The Samaritan *Tolidah* tells how Abisha, great-grandson of Aaron, wrote a scroll of the law that was, for a long time, kept in a Samaritan synagogue in Elon Moreh. One day, the priest charged with displaying it to the people “carried the Scroll away from the synagogue to Gilgal in Ephraim, where the people quarreled with him about it; and as they were arranging themselves in Gilgal, and the Scroll was opened, there occurred in the world a great earthquake and thunderings of lightning, and a mighty wind lifted the Scroll out of the ark wherein it lay, and it was carried up and whirled into the air by the wind, while the community was watching, trembling and weeping. But they strengthened their hearts and took hold of the end of the Scroll, and it happened that a fragment was torn off.”<sup>21</sup>

Related to these stories about the ark as a repository for the law of Moses is a story in *Pseudo-Philo* 26:1–15. As those verses explain, God commanded Kenaz to place books and stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes into the ark and conceal it on the mountain beside the altar (see also *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* 57:11–21).

To this day, Jews and Samaritans alike keep the scroll of the Torah (law) of Moses in a cabinet known as an ark. It is typically covered with a small curtain representing the veil that separated the holy of holies of the ancient temple or tabernacle (where the original ark of the covenant was kept) from the rest of the sanctuary. While some of this symbolism is not present in Joseph Smith’s account of the hiding place of the plates, the stone box in which they were deposited clearly served the same purpose as the ark in Moses’ day. The two receptacles are also alike in that in addition to the records, each contained other sacred artifacts. This will be further discussed in chapter 6, “Hiding Sacred Relics.”

### An Ancient Practice

One early tradition suggests that the earthly practice of keeping sacred documents in boxes is based on the heavenly pattern. In *3 Enoch* 27:1–2, we read that the angel in charge of the heavenly archives keeps a scroll in a sealed box. The box is to be opened and the scroll is to be read in the heavenly court.

*Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* 50 notes that the records of the Persian king were placed “in the king’s box,” whence they could be retrieved and read when necessary.<sup>22</sup>

The tenth-century Arab chronographer al-Kisa’i wrote that prior to Adam’s death, Adam told Seth how in his heavenly vision he had seen what was “written on the Canopy of the Throne and the gates of Paradise, the layers of the heavens and the leaves of the Tuba tree.” In addition, “God had given Adam a white cloth from Paradise and placed it in the coffer.”<sup>23</sup>

The idea is also found in early Christian and Jewish lore. At the end of the Ethiopic version of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, after telling Clement of the transfiguration, Peter instructed him to hide the revelation in a box. In an early Jewish legend, Rabbi Yohanan noted that as he and others sailed in a ship, they spotted in the water a box studded with precious stones and pearls. A diver went to retrieve the box, but a fish guarding it attacked him. The diver drove the fish away by throwing a hide full of vinegar on it, but when he reached for the box, a heavenly voice told him to leave it because it contained threads that would be used in the future to make garments for the righteous (see TB *Baba Batra* 74a–b).

A text from an ancient Egyptian temple archive that calls itself “the tenth (?) Hidden [Book of] Moses” (PGM XIII. 734–1077) describes how to inscribe a text on a gold or silver lamella (plate) and place it “in a clean box.”<sup>24</sup> Another ancient Egyptian text tells how Horus, son of Panishi, slept overnight

in a temple, where the god Thoth told him in a dream that he would find a box containing a book written by Thoth himself concealed in a naos within the temple. After copying the magical text, Horus returned the original to its place.<sup>25</sup> Another Egyptian document, the *Berlin Medical Papyrus*, expressly states that it is a copy of an earlier book discovered rolled up in a case concealed beneath the feet of a statue of the god Anubis. Chapter 137 of the Egyptian Book of the Dead mentions “the books of Prince Herutataf, who discovered them in a secret coffer.”<sup>26</sup>

An Egyptian text from the thirteenth century B.C. (Papyrus Cairo 30646) tells of Setne Khamwas, son of King Ramses II, who learned of a book of magic written by the scribal god Thoth and kept in the tomb of a prince named Naneferkaptah. He went to the tomb and found the book, which radiated a strong light, and tried to take it. His efforts were interrupted by the spirits of Naneferkaptah and his wife, Ahwere, who recounted the book’s tale. An old priest had told Nanef that Thoth’s book of magic was hidden in a gold box inside a silver box, inside an ebony and ivory box, inside a box of juniper wood, inside a copper box, inside an iron box concealed in the river at Coptos. It was defended by serpents, scorpions, and various reptiles, which Naneferkaptah had to kill in order to obtain the book. Naneferkaptah then took the book and copied it onto a papyrus roll. Various misfortunes befell him and his wife and he was buried with the book. Setne was not dissuaded and removed the book from the tomb, but his father later ordered him to return it.<sup>27</sup>

The idea of hiding sacred records in boxes has continued to more recent times. In the early sixteenth century, a story arose that the judgment of Jesus, written in Latin (Hebrew, according to some versions), had been discovered in a box in Vienne, southern France. Several decades later, in 1580, a new

version was published. This was said to have been found at Aquila (also called Aquill, Aguila, or Abruzzi), in the kingdom of Naples (Italy), anciently called Amiternum (or Amitorum) and said to be the birthplace of Pontius Pilate. Though both versions of the story were published and circulated, they were denounced by some sixteenth-century scholars. In the 1580 story, the document in Hebrew was on a copper plate enclosed in three boxes (of marble, iron, and the innermost of stone) in a ruined wall. In 1839 the story resurfaced in France. In this version Napoleon's men, during the French occupation of the kingdom of Naples (1806–1815), found the brass or copper plate in an ebony box kept in the sacristy of the Carthusian charterhouse, near Naples. Dominique Vivant Denon, who had charge of removing art treasures to France, left the copper plate in the chapel of Caserta, probably the royal chapel of the Neapolitan kings, but brought back a translation and a copy of the plate. The original plate was sold to a Lord Howard after Denon's death.<sup>28</sup>

### **Stone Boxes**

The use of stone boxes to house documents is known from the Mediterranean world from which Lehi came.<sup>29</sup> In the early 1900s, archaeologists uncovered a granite box at Alexandria, Egypt, which held the writings of a late Greek author.<sup>30</sup> In 1944 a farmer in the western Peloponnesus of Greece was digging a well when, at a depth of twenty feet, he found a stone box. Smashing the lid, he found a scroll on which he and others saw writing. He informed police, but because of the civil war with the Communists, the local director of antiquities could not come immediately. When at length he arrived, he found that the scroll had been thrown on the dunghill and had disintegrated.<sup>31</sup> More recently, Greek archaeologist Spyridon

Marinatos found at Mesenia a marble chest that he suggested may have been “a library box.”<sup>32</sup>

Roman lore holds that the seventh-century king Numa ordered that he not be cremated, but buried instead in a stone coffin alongside another such coffin that was to contain holy books he had written. When he died, his request was obeyed and the two stone sarcophagi were sealed with lead. The body and books were interred at the foot of Janus Hill. Four or five centuries later, the coffins were accidentally discovered and opened. Numa’s body had decayed, but his books had all been preserved. Hemina and Pliny both reported that the scrolls had been treated with citrus oil to preserve them.<sup>33</sup>

In 1970, the Jordanian government announced that it had purchased eight parchment scrolls that had reportedly been discovered in a stone chest inside a tomb. Written in a previously unknown script but thought by some to be Philistine documents, their provenance could not be determined because they had not been discovered by archaeologists. A Jordanian entrepreneur living in Jerusalem had acquired them from the unnamed discoverers and had sold them to the Jordanian Department of Antiquities in June 1966. The dealer believed that the documents had come from an ancient site in the region of Hebron, south of Jerusalem.<sup>34</sup>

According to the preface of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the document was discovered during the fourth century in a stone box buried beneath a house in Tarsus, when a young man followed the instructions of an angel and searched for it. The story, which closely parallels that of the discovery of the Book of Mormon in a number of details, is discussed in chapter 5, “Angels as Guardians of Hidden Books,” and in the appendix by Steven Booras, “The Book of Mormon and the *Apocalypse of Paul*.”



### Metal Boxes

The use of metal boxes to store important writings is also attested. The eleventh-century Arab chronographer al-Thaʿlabi mentioned a writing that was sealed in an iron box.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in 1965 a set of nineteen inscribed gold plates was found in a bronze box. The plates, held together by a pin-and-hinge system, were found beneath the Wanggung-ri pagoda in the Chollabuk province of South Korea.<sup>36</sup> The bronze box had been placed inside a stone box in the eighth century A.D. and contained the *Diamond Sutra* from the Buddhist scriptures.

Drower noted that “during times of stress and danger, the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran ‘buried the books’, and this has been done, according to them, many times.”<sup>37</sup> The sacred texts of the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran are typically “wrapped in white cloths and kept in a box, often a metal box” and are never written “on parchment,” only on “papyrus, metal, and stone.”<sup>38</sup>

The Yezîdîs, who inhabit the Kurdistan area of Turkey, keep books that are considered so secret that one man who revealed information concerning them was actually punished with death.<sup>39</sup> Their two most sacred books, *The Black Book* and *The Book of Enlightenment* (or Revelation) are kept hidden away until festival time. Most Yezîdîs do not know where they are kept, and no Christian or Muslim is permitted to see them. “In times of danger the manuscripts are kept locked in a wooden and silver box, measuring thirty-three centimetres long, twenty-two centimetres wide, and seven centimetres high, which is hidden in a cave having a concealed entrance.” Three keys to the box are kept, and on the lid is a depiction of the seven angels and other nature symbols.<sup>40</sup> On a related note, another hidden document comes from the Temple of Sheikh ʿAdî, the principal Yezîdî shrine, which is said to have originally been

a Nestorian monastery deserted by the monks. Pulling down the altar to bury their leader there, the Yezîdîs found therein a Syrian inscription that they dutifully hid away.<sup>41</sup>

Two medieval Jewish texts, *Sepher ha-Razim* (Book of Mysteries) and the *Book of Noah*, indicate that Noah possessed the heavenly book delivered to Adam and “placed (the book) in a golden cabinet and brought it first into the ark to learn from it the times of the day and to investigate from it the times of the night.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Sanctuary/Palace Foundation Boxes**

From discoveries made since Joseph Smith’s time, we now know that the kings of ancient Mesopotamia hid written documents in boxes, often of carved stone, that were buried in the foundations of their temples and palaces. The most comprehensive discussion of foundation burials is by H. Curtis Wright, from whom we draw much of the information included in this section.<sup>43</sup>

One of the earliest foundation boxes was a stone chest from about 2900 B.C. discovered during excavations at Tel Brak.<sup>44</sup> During excavations at Mari of the Ur III period (circa 2100–2000 B.C.), André Parrot discovered six inscribed bronze plates deposited in the corners of the foundations of the Nin-Hur-Sag temple constructed by King Niwar-Mer. The plates were deposited directly on the mud bricks used in the construction.<sup>45</sup> Another of Mari’s rulers, Apil-kin, hollowed out bricks in which to hide the records buried in the foundations of his buildings. One such box contained a bronze plate encased in wood.<sup>46</sup>

A number of Sumerian kings are known to have left written records in foundation boxes. One of the earliest, dating to



circa 3000 B.C., was found in the temple of Dagan. Now housed at the Louvre in Paris, the stone square box, complete with lid, contained an inscribed bronze plate, a foundation deposit of King Ishtup-Illum. Also found in the cavity in the brick wall with the box were other written records—a tablet of white limestone and one of schist.<sup>47</sup>

During his excavations at the ancient city of Ur, near Babylon, C. Leonard Woolley found, in a building built in the ninth year of Rim-Sin, king of Larsa (circa 1990 B.C.), a burnt brick box built into the wall. The box contained a copper figure of the king and a dedication tablet.<sup>48</sup>

In 1937, an inscribed gold tablet was found buried beneath the foundation of a building erected by the queen of the ancient Sumerian city of Umma.<sup>49</sup> A metal foundation tablet of King Warad-Sin of Larsa (1843–1823 B.C.) is also known, as is a copper foundation tablet containing an inscription of Simat-Inanna, the wife of the Sumerian king Rim-Sin (1822–1763 B.C.).<sup>50</sup> At Ur, Woolley found, in the ruins of a building of the mid-seventh century B.C., a series of boxes containing statuettes. One of the boxes contained a bronze plaque.<sup>51</sup>

The Assyrians, who later controlled Mesopotamia, also left foundation deposits. Excavation of the Ishtar temple built by king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244–1208 B.C.) uncovered various buried relics, including inscribed tablets, glass beads, and bits of ivory, all laid out on a stone slab placed atop the mud-brick foundation. The inscribed tablets included thirteen of gold or silver and seven each of lead and alabaster. Other inscribed gold and silver tablets were found throughout the complex.<sup>52</sup>

A foundation box from the ancient city of Apqu (Bumariyah or Tell Abu-Maria), in Iraq, made its way to Philadelphia, where its broken pieces were reassembled. The box bears an inscription commissioned by King Ashurnasirpal

II (883–859 B.C.) on the sides and the lid. A limestone box bearing this king's name was found at Balawat, near the ancient Assyrian capital Nineveh. It contained two inscribed clay tablets. A third inscribed tablet of the same size but made of marble was found lying on a nearby altar. The site archaeologist speculated that ancient priests placed it there to read but did not return it to the box before the temple was destroyed.<sup>53</sup>

A pair of gold and silver plates commissioned by Ashurnasirpal II exists. Their provenance is unknown, though the inscription found on the plates makes it clear that they were foundation burials for a palace.<sup>54</sup> A text of King Ashurbanipal I (circa 668–631 B.C.), written on a clay prism, also describes the founding of the temple of Nergal at Kutha “upon tables of silver and gold.”<sup>55</sup>

A stone box from the time of Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.) was found in the ruins of the west gate of the outer wall of the ancient city of Assur, but any inscribed tablets that it may have contained were missing.<sup>56</sup>

King Sargon II (722–705 B.C.) repeats throughout his annals that he kept records on plates of gold, silver, bronze, and lead.<sup>57</sup> In 1854, during excavations of his palace at Khorsabad, six small inscribed plates (gold, silver, bronze, tin, and lead, with one alabaster) were found in a stone box buried beneath the palace foundation. The box, along with the lead and alabaster tablets, were lost when the ship carrying them sank into the Tigris River in Iraq on 23 May 1855. The four surviving plates—of gold, silver, bronze, and tin—were taken to Paris and are housed in the Louvre.<sup>58</sup>

Wright hastens to note that the provenance of some of the Assyrian boxes is unknown. Some may have been used in ancient libraries rather than buried in foundations. He points out that a half-dozen statues of Nabu, which were found at

Nimrud and Arslan Tash in northern Syria, show the deity holding a square box in his hands. The association of the box with Nabu, the god of writing, suggests it was meant to contain records.<sup>59</sup>

The neo-Babylonians (Chaldeans), who put an end to the Assyrian hegemony in the seventh century B.C., similarly left records deposited in the foundations of public buildings. Excavation of the temple of Ningal at Ur uncovered a limestone tablet, a steatite tablet, and three copper tablets from two earlier kings (Warad-Sin and Kurigalzu II, between whom there was a considerable gap in time). The tablets had been reburied when the temple was refurbished about 650 B.C. At Sippar, near Babylon, excavators found a lidded stone box containing an inscribed stone from the time of the Babylonian king Nabopolassar (626–605 B.C.).<sup>60</sup> The box was probably originally buried in a foundation.

The Persians continued the practice of depositing metal records in stone foundation boxes after they conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. In 1926 at Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana), Persia (now Iran), archaeologist Ernst E. Herzfeld discovered two small tablets, one silver and the other gold. Hidden inside a stone box laid in the foundation of the palace, the tablets bore inscriptions from Darius I (521–485 B.C.) about the erection of palaces in the city. Suspecting that similar foundation tablets might be found in Darius's palace at Persepolis, archaeologists made a concerted effort to locate such records in 1933. At Persepolis, two pairs of plates (one silver and one gold in each pair) were found in stone boxes placed in the foundation corners of the palace. In all, six plates were found, inscribed in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. Darius originally had a box containing a gold and a silver tablet in each corner of his audience hall, but only two of the boxes re-

mained to be discovered. The surviving plates are in the National Archaeological Museum in Tehran, Iran.<sup>61</sup>

In 1930 a gold tablet containing a ten-line inscription from Ariaramnes, great-grandfather of Darius I, was found at Hamadan, the ancient site of Ecbatana. Additional records on gold tablets found at the same site were laid down by Arsames (the son of Ariaramnes), Artaxerxes III, and Darius II.<sup>62</sup> These records were probably originally buried in foundations.

Foundation boxes containing written documents are known outside Mesopotamia as well. Hugh Nibley compared the Mesopotamian foundation burials with the tradition “that the wise Arab King Nu’man of Hira ordered a copy of the poems of the Arabs to be buried in his White Palace.”<sup>63</sup> A square depression was found at each corner of the Haldis Temple at Toprakkale, near Lake Van in Turkey, probably from the eighth century B.C. Two of these depressions each contained a square bronze plate and scraps of gold and silver sheets. Nothing was inscribed, and it may thus be that the Arabs adopted the Mesopotamian practice of burying plates in foundation stones but did not write on the plates.<sup>64</sup>

Egypt also has its share of foundation deposits. Dozens of small metallic plates were found in the foundations of the Serapis temple, which housed an ancient library. Ten such foundation plaques, with hieroglyphic and Greek inscriptions from the time of King Ptolemy III (246–221 B.C.) were found in 1943 by Alan Rowe. Three were metal plates (one each of gold, silver, and bronze), five were opaque glass, one was faience, and one was made of mud. A similar set of ten plaques from the same king were found the following year in another foundation trench. A year later, a third set was found in another corner of the foundation. Ultimately, ten more deposit holes were uncovered. Some had been plundered in earlier

times, but a total of 43 foundation tablets were recovered from an estimated 130 originally deposited.<sup>65</sup>

The city of Alexandria, Egypt, also has foundation deposits. A plaster box was found in the Harpocrates Shrine, and the Roman Serapeum included rectangular limestone coffers in niches in its long underground passages. In 1847 a granite box was discovered in the garden of the Consulate General of Prussia. Its Greek inscription, “For three volumes by Dioscurides,” suggests that it originally contained books, probably written on papyrus rolls, that may have been sold on the antiquities market. The 380-pound box had already been lost in 1848.<sup>66</sup>

Foundation deposits are also known from the Far East. A copy of *The Law or Dharma Preached by the Buddha*, revered in Pali Buddhism, was found concealed in the brick chamber of an old mound at Hmawza, in the Prome district of Burma. It consisted of twenty leaves of gold and two gold covers.<sup>67</sup> Two other inscribed gold plates were found in the same region, in the village of Maunggun in a brick built into an old pagoda.<sup>68</sup>

### **Earthenware Containers**

The preservation of documents in containers other than boxes is also attested. Manuscripts from pharaonic and Roman Egypt have frequently been found in jars.<sup>69</sup> A large cache of Old Kingdom execration texts, written on small ostraca, was found buried in a clay jar near the great pyramids in Giza in 1955.<sup>70</sup>

In 1931 thirty papyrus leaves were discovered buried in jars in a cemetery or church ruins near Aphroditopolis. The texts included both Old and New Testament books, several leaves from the pseudepigraphic *1 Enoch*, and a Christian homily written in the fourth or fifth century A.D. Many of the manuscripts were purchased by A. Chester Beatty, an American living in England, and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

Most now reside in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, local Egyptians discovered at Thebes (probably in a tomb) an earthen jar containing nineteen papyri. They were purchased in about 1875 by Lord Amherst of Hackney, England, and in 1912 they were purchased from his estate by J. Pierpont Morgan and left privately with a Mr. Lamacraft, a British Museum expert on mounting. In 1945 Charles F. Nims found the papyri at the British Museum and in 1947 arranged to have them transferred to the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. The underlying language of one of the Amherst papyri is Aramaic, but the papyrus is written in Egyptian demotic script. Although the text is a collection of pagan hymns, it was in part derived from the biblical Psalm 20. The papyrus is thus a religious document containing a quote from the Bible and written in a “reformed Egyptian” script, carefully concealed in a protective container and hidden away—all elements known from the story of the Book of Mormon.<sup>71</sup> Many dozens of other early biblical documents that were purchased from Egyptian antiquities dealers may have come from similar caches.

In December 1982, excavations at the Sri Lanka site of Anuradhpura uncovered fragments of a broken clay pot. Beneath the fragments were seven inscribed gold plates, and archaeologists surmised that Buddhist monks in the ninth-century monastery had hidden the book in the clay pot during an enemy attack but were unable to retrieve it. The text on the plates is a well-known Buddhist sutra. On the basis of the size of the extant text, it was suggested that as many as one hundred such plates may lie hidden in the vicinity.

In 1996 a collection of thirteen birch-bark scrolls from the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Gandhara, on the Pakistani-Afghan border, was found preserved in pottery jars.



The most well-known caches of documents hidden in pottery are the Nag Hammadi texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The former, comprising forty-seven separate texts in thirteen codices, were found in a single large clay pot buried near the village of Nag Hammadi in Egypt, where they had been concealed about A.D. 400. Many of the approximately eight hundred Dead Sea Scrolls were preserved in clay pots hidden in caves south of Jericho, near the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. About half the scrolls were found in Cave 4 and had evidently been hidden away in haste, for no pottery vessels were found in that cave.

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls is made of copper and comprises a list of various treasures hidden away for the future. Known as the *Copper Scroll* (3Q15), it specifically mentions goblets, cups, jars, vases, and jugs. Some of these vessels contained gold and silver, while others held written documents. Lines 4–5 in column VI note the burial place of an amphora containing a book. The beginning of column 8 states that books and ritual vessels had been hidden in an aqueduct. Some of the concealed treasures were hidden “bene[ath the] large [stone]” (V, 2–4), “in the stone . . . under it” (VIII, 5), “under the large slab” (XI, 6–7), “under the black stone” (XII, 2), or near “a stone held in place by two supports” (X, 9). These stones are reminiscent of the large stone laid atop the box in which Moroni concealed the plates of the Book of Mormon. At the end of the *Copper Scroll*, we read that “in the tunnel which is in Sechab, to the North of Kochlit . . . a copy of this text and its explanation and its measurements and the inventory of everything, item by item” (XII, 10–13).<sup>72</sup>

In his *Ecclesiastical History* 6.16, written about A.D. 324, Eusebius reported that the church father Origen (A.D. 184–253) had found an ancient translation of the Book of

Psalms “in a jar near Jericho in the time of Antoninus, the son of Severus.”<sup>73</sup> This would have been between A.D. 211 and 217. Notably, it was just a few miles south of Jericho that the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in jars hidden in caves.

Some ancient texts also speak of preserving written documents in clay pots. Paul may have alluded to the practice when he told the Corinthians, “If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost,” and noted, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:3, 7). An early Jewish text, the *Testament of Moses*, also mentions the process of preserving documents in clay pots. In this text, Moses instructed Joshua on how to preserve the books, or parchments, he was leaving in his charge: anoint them with cedar (oil?) and deposit them in earthen jars until the day of recompense (see 1:16–18).<sup>74</sup> Similarly, according to the *Book of Jasher* 47:26–29, the patriarch Jacob concealed documents in an earthen vessel. The Bible describes the prophet Jeremiah doing the same (see Jeremiah 32:14).

Two small silver plates and two small gold plates from the reigns of Shalmaneser I (1274–1245 B.C.) and Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244–1208 B.C.) were found inside a container that was formed by lacing together the rims of two bowls. The container was placed in the ground and then covered by a larger bowl and buried. It is thought that these plates were reburied in the time of Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.).<sup>75</sup>

During times of plague, or sickness, the Mandaeans place magic exorcism rolls between two bowls (one inverted above the other) and bury the bowls by the threshold of their house or by a grave.<sup>76</sup> Sometimes they inscribe metal dishes or plaques with magical formulas and bury them beneath the threshold to prevent the entry of demons, especially into reed huts.<sup>77</sup>



### Other Containers

Ancient documents have been found in containers other than boxes and pots. In 1958 two bronze tablets from the end of the first century B.C. or the early first century A.D. were found hidden beneath two roofing tiles in the Spanish town of Minigua.<sup>78</sup>

In the late 1940s, farmers in the Bertiz valley near the Turkish province of Maras found a buried bronze sphere that contained thin silver-lead plates from the late seventh century B.C. (about the time of Lehi) bearing twenty-two lines of Semitic inscriptions.<sup>79</sup> A similar story is known from antiquity. Pausanius recorded (circa 370 B.C.) a legend in which Epiteles, son of Aeschines, had a dream in which he was told where to dig to rescue the Great Goddess shut up in her brazen chamber. Digging at the spot, he discovered a bronze urn containing a very thin sheet of tin rolled up like a scroll and inscribed with the mysteries of the Great Goddess.<sup>80</sup>

In 1964 three gold plates and one bronze plate from about 500 B.C. were found at the southern Italian site of Pyrgi. Written in Phoenician (a form of Canaanite) and Etruscan, the plates were hidden in a rectangular niche between two temples. The niche was constructed of blocks of tufa and three tiles, and the plates were concealed beneath a heap of pottery fragments.<sup>81</sup>

### Summary

This chapter has shown that the practice of concealing records in boxes, particularly stone boxes, is an ancient one. It predates the Book of Mormon by many centuries and was still being practiced when Moroni deposited the plates in the stone box from which Joseph Smith later removed them. With the exception of the biblical account of the ark of the covenant,

however, none of this information was available in Joseph Smith's day. This lends authenticity to his account and to the record known as the Book of Mormon.

## Notes

1. *Deseret Evening News*, 16 August 1878, 2.
2. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, Lucy Mack Smith, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 102.
3. See *ibid.*, 104.
4. See *ibid.*, 107.
5. See *ibid.*, 109.
6. See *ibid.*, 111–13.
7. Testimony of Eight Witnesses; compare JS—H 1:34.
8. See Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, 107–8, 112–13, 118.
9. See *ibid.*, 47. Two biblical prophets, Ezekiel and John the Revelator, were told to eat books (see Ezekiel 2:8–3:3; Revelation 10:8–10; compare Jeremiah 1:9).
10. See Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides), *Mishneh Torah, Ha-Qadmah*. Support for the idea also comes from the Jerusalem Talmud (see TY *Ta'anit* 4.2), which notes that three master copies of the Pentateuch were kept in the temple at Jerusalem, against which other copies could be checked (see also *Sipre* 2.356, *Soperim* 6.4; *ʿAbot de Rabbi Nathan* 2:46).
11. The story is recounted in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1988), 3:439–40. I am indebted to John W. Welch, who refers to the account in his “Doubled, Sealed, Witnessed Documents: From the Ancient World to the Book of Mormon,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 419–20.
12. See Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 13:232. The book was originally published in 1898.

13. See 2 Maccabees 2:1–8; 4 Baruch 3:7–19; TB Yoma 54a; *Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 10.16–17.

14. The purpose of the genizah is discussed in chapter 9 of this volume, “Books in the Treasury.”

15. Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 36.

16. Ben Zion Wacholder, “The ‘Sealed’ Torah versus the ‘Revealed’ Torah: An Exegesis of Damascus Covenant V, 1–6 and Jeremiah 32, 10–14,” *Revue de Qumran* 12/47 (December 1986): 357 n. 21.

17. BM denotes documents held in the British Museum, London.

18. In Hebrew, the ten commandments are called “the Ten Words.”

19. Moses Gaster, *The Asatir: The Samaritan Book of the “Secrets of Moses”* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1927), 303–5.

20. John Bowman, ed. and trans., *Samaritan Documents relating to Their History, Religion and Life* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1977), 89.

21. *Ibid.*, 47–48.

22. Gerald Friedlander, trans., *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Hermon Press, 1965), 398 n. 3. The manuscript read “pot” (or “vessel”), but the translator suggested that “box” was meant.

23. W. M. Thackston Jr., trans., *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa’i* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), 81–82. Seth’s possession of the coffer passed to him by Adam is also noted on page 85, in connection with the fact that “the guardianship passed to Seth, and the sons of his father obeyed him.”

24. Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 194.

25. See Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, trans. Ann Morrisett (New York: Evergreen Profile, 1960), 125.

26. Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1960), 660–61.

27. See Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 3:126–38. A recap of the story is also found in Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 59–60.

28. The story is told in Per Beskow, “The Copperplate from Aquila,” in *Strange Tales about Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 16–24. In chapter 6 of that book, Beskow tells the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The story of the Aquila document is also told in Edgar J. Goodspeed, “The Death Warrant of Jesus Christ,” in *Famous “Biblical” Hoaxes* (originally *Modern Apocrypha*) (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1956), 92–96.

29. Stone boxes are also known from the New World, though their purpose remains unknown. Paul Cheesman, while teaching at Brigham Young University, collected information on and photographs of more than fifty stone boxes found in Central and South America. See Paul R. Cheesman, *Ancient Writing on Metal Plates: Archaeological Findings Support Mormon Claims* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1985), 77–80.

30. See H. Curtis Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes,” in *By Study and Also By Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 283. Wright cites Adolph J. Reinach, “Dioskourides g tomoi,” *Bulletin de la Société Royale d’Archéologie d’Alexandria* 11 (1909): 350–70.

31. The story was reported by Gilbert Highet, “The Wondrous Survival of Records,” *Horizon* 5 (November 1962): 93, and is cited by Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 273–74.

32. Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 293 n.

33. The story is reported in Plutarch, *Numa* 12.2–5; Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 13.27.84–86; Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 40.29.3–6; Lactantius, *Divinarum institutionum libri VII* 1.22.5; Valerius

Maximus, *Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilia* 1.1.12; Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 7.34.7–11; *De Viris Illustribus Urbis Romae* 3.3. See the discussion in Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 275–76 and notes. The ancient practice of burying books in tombs is noted in chapter 2 of this volume, “Hidden Records.”

34. See the note in *Kadmos* 10 (1971): 102–3.

35. See al-Thaʿlabi, *Qisas al-Anbiyaʾ* (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi wa-Awladuhu, A. H. 1340), 246. Hugh Nibley was the first to bring this information to the attention of Latter-day Saints. I am grateful to Brian Hauglid for confirming details of the story from the Arabic text.

36. The plates are housed in the Seoul National Museum.

37. E. S. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 22.

38. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

39. See R. H. W. Empson, *The Cult of the Peacock Angel: A Short Account of the Yezîdî Tribes of Kurdistan* (London: H. F. and G. Witherby, 1928), 146.

40. See *ibid.*, 151–52.

41. See *ibid.*, 33.

42. Michael A. Morgan, trans., *Sepher ha-Razim, The Book of the Mysteries* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 18–19. For the Hebrew text of the *Book of Noah*, see Adolph Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash* (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1967), 3:159. The story is examined in more detail in chapter 5 of this volume, “Angels as Guardians of Hidden Books.”

43. See Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents.” The article was based on Wright’s earlier study, *Ancient Burials of Metallic Foundation Documents in Stone Boxes*, University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science Occasional Papers, no. 157 (Champagne, Ill.: University of Chicago, 1982), 1–42. Wright drew on Richard Ellis’s Yale University doctoral dissertation on Mesopotamian foundational deposits.

44. See Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents," 282, and the bibliography in his footnote 61.

45. See *ibid.*, 285.

46. See *ibid.*, 286.

47. See *ibid.*, 285–86. For a photo of the box, see Cheesman, *Ancient Writing on Metal Plates*, 78.

48. See Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents," 287.

49. See F. Thureau-Dangin, "Une tablette en or provenant d'Umma," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 34 (1937): 177–82.

50. See C. J. Gadd, "Babylonian Foundation Texts: 1. Limestone and copper tablets of a wife of Rim-Sin," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1926): 679–88.

51. See C. Leonard Woolley, "Babylonian Prophylactic Figures," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (October 1926): 689–713. For the use of foundation boxes to conceal sacred relics (as opposed to written records), see chapter 6 of this volume, "Hiding Sacred Relics."

52. See Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents," 288–89, and his notes.

53. See *ibid.*, 291. For a photo of the box, see Cheesman, *Ancient Writing on Metal Plates*, 78.

54. See Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents," 289.

55. *Ibid.*, 290.

56. See *ibid.*, 292.

57. See *ibid.*, 293 and note.

58. See *ibid.*, 293–94 and notes.

59. See *ibid.*, 293.

60. For a photo of the box and its contents, see Cheesman, *Ancient Writing on Metal Plates*, 79.

61. The Darius plates were first brought to the attention of the Latter-day Saints by Franklin S. Harris (Sr.), "Gold Plates in Persia," *Improvement Era* (December 1940): 714–15, 764, and were later noted by Thomas Stuart Ferguson, "Gold Plates and the Book of

Mormon,” *Improvement Era*, April 1962, 232–33, 270–71. See the discussion in Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 280 and the bibliography in nn. 51–56.

62. The Ariaramnes and Arsames inscriptions are noted in David Diringer, *The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind*, 3rd ed. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), 1:138. See the discussion in Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 282 and the bibliography in nn. 57–58. Of the inscriptions found at Hamadan, one silver tablet and three gold tablets had been cut by looters, from whom they were rescued before being melted down.

63. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 24.

64. See Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 294–95.

65. See *ibid.*, 283, 296–98, and notes.

66. See *ibid.*, 299–301.

67. See C. Duroiselle, “Excavations at Hmawza,” *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India* (1926–27): 171–79; “The Gold-leaf Pali Manuscript of Old Prome,” *Report of the Superintendent, Archaeological Survey of Burma* (1938–39): 12. Both are cited by Wright in “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 279–80.

68. See Maung Tun Nyein, “Maunggun Gold Plates,” *Epigraphica Indica* 5 (1898–99): 101–2, cited by Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 280.

69. See K. Preisendanz, *Papyrusfunde und Papyrusforschung* (Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1934), 113, cited by Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 309 n. 28.

70. See A. M. Abu Bakr and J. Osing, “Ächtungstexte aus dem Alten Reich,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 29/2 (1973): 97–133.

71. For a discussion and bibliography, see John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, “Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996):



156–63; John Gee and John A. Tvedtnes, “Ancient Manuscripts Fit Book of Mormon Pattern,” *Insights*, February 1999.

72. The English translation used here is taken from Martínez, *Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 461–63.

73. Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1:263.

74. See James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:927.

75. See Richard S. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 98; W. Andrae, *Die jüngeren Ishtar-Tempel in Assur* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1935), 51–54. Both are cited by Wright in “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 280, 288.

76. See Drower, *Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 25.

77. See *ibid.*, 50.

78. See H. Nesselhauf, “Zwei Bronzeurkunden aus Minigua,” *Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Institute (Madrid)* 1 (1960): 142, cited by Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 279.

79. See Muhibbe Anstock-Darga, “Semitische Inscripten auf Silbertäfelchen aus dem ‘Bertiz’-Tal (Umgebung von ‘Maras’),” *Jahrbuch für kleinasiatische Forschung* 1 (1950): 199–200, cited in Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 24, 452 n. 22.

80. See Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 4.26.6–8, in *Pausanias’s Description of Greece*, ed. J. G. Frazer (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1965), 1:218–19. I am grateful to William J. Hamblin for bringing this to my attention in his “Sacred Writings on Bronze Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean” (FARMS, 1994), 12–13.

81. The volume of publications on the Pyrgi inscriptions is too large to give here. They are among the most well studied of ancient inscriptions.