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Books in the Treasury

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Books in the Treasury

I went forth unto the treasury of Laban. And as I went forth towards the treasury of Laban, behold, I saw the servant of Laban who had the keys of the treasury. And I commanded him in the voice of Laban, that he should go with me into the treasury. And he supposed me to be his master, Laban, for he beheld the garments and also the sword girded about my loins. And he spake unto me concerning the elders of the Jews, he knowing that his master, Laban, had been out by night among them. And I spake unto him as if it had been Laban. And I also spake unto him that I should carry the engravings, which were upon the plates of brass, to my elder brethren, who were without the walls. (1 Nephi 4:20–24)

The earliest records possessed by the Nephites were the brass plates brought from Jerusalem. These plates had been kept in “the treasury of Laban,” whence Nephi retrieved them. The concept of keeping books in a treasury, while strange to the modern mind, was a common practice anciently, and the term often denoted what we would today call a library.

Ezra 5:17–6:2 speaks of a “treasure house” containing written records. The Aramaic word rendered “treasure” in this passage

is *ginzayyâ*, from the root meaning “to keep, hide” in both Hebrew and Aramaic. In Esther 3:9 and 4:7, the Hebrew word of the same origin is used to denote a treasury where money is kept. Also from this root is the Mishnaic Hebrew word *g^enîzâh*, denoting a repository for worn synagogue scrolls, and *gannâz*, meaning “archivist,” or one in charge of records. The related Mandaean¹ word *ginza* has several meanings, one of which is “library.” For example, in the *Thousand and Twelve Questions* 1.1.203 and 2.7.436 it refers to holy books.

The practice of placing worn-out scrolls in a synagogue treasury, which continues in Judaism today, is noted in Mishnah *Šabbat* 9:6, where the verb meaning “hide” is from the same root as *genizah*. Sometimes the scrolls are buried in a cemetery. In Israel, it is the practice to actually hold a funeral service at the grave site for the scrolls. Hugh Nibley suggests that the Dead Sea Scrolls, hidden in caves, were actually a *genizah*.² Significantly, the Christian documents found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt were buried near a cemetery.

Several old *genizot* (the plural form of *genizah*) have been discovered. The most well-known was the sealed room uncovered in the ninth-century-A.D. Old Cairo synagogue in Egypt during renovations in 1890. In 1896, two Scottish ladies, Mrs. Agnes Smith Klewish and her sister, Mrs. Margaret Dunlop Wilson of Cambridge University, brought back from the *genizah* a page from an ancient Palestinian Talmud and a portion of a second-century-B.C. Hebrew text of Ecclesiasticus, or Ben-Sirach, previously known only from the Greek. They turned the materials over to Solomon Schechter, who read talmudic studies at Cambridge. Schechter thereafter went to Cairo, where he was taken to the *genizah* by the city’s chief rabbi, Raphael ben Simon. He recovered many more manuscripts, most of them biblical documents, and sent back 164

boxes containing about 100,000 manuscript fragments for the Cambridge University Library. Cataloging the find took a full decade.

Meanwhile, an equal volume of manuscripts from the same source ended up at various other libraries, including the Bodleian at Oxford and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In all, the Cairo collection included biblical, apocryphal, and Hebrew pseudepigraphic books, as well as Aramaic Targumim, biblical trilinguals (Hebrew/Aramaic/Greek), and other documents, including copies of a text (the *Zadokite Work*, or *Damascus Document*) of which copies were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls half a century later.

Another such synagogue genizah was recently discovered in Jerusalem. During the early 1960s, fourteen scrolls (biblical, sectarian, and apocryphal) were found at the site of Masada, overlooking the Dead Sea from the west. Two of the biblical scrolls were found in pits dug into the floor of a synagogue and covered with earth and stones.

Some documents have been kept securely in Middle Eastern monasteries. For example, a number of early copies of the Bible were discovered in the Greek Orthodox Saint Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai peninsula. The monastery is noted for its library, a portion of which was for a long time sealed off by plaster over the door.

Epiphanius (died A.D. 403) reported that Jewish converts to Christianity told him that the Gospel of John, as translated from Greek into Hebrew, was found in the Jewish "treasuries" at Tiberias, where it was secretly kept along with a copy of the Acts of the Apostles as translated from Greek into Hebrew (see *Panarion* 1.2.3, 6, 7–9; 4,1). One of his informants was a Josephus of Tiberias. This Josephus went to the "gazophylacium" there which was sealed—"gaza" means "treasure" in

Hebrew. As many had different notions about this treasury because of its seal, Josephus plucked up the courage to open it unobserved—and found no money, but books money could not buy. Browsing through them he found the Gospel of John, translated from Greek to Hebrew, as I said, and the Acts of the Apostles—as well as Matthew’s Gospel, which is actually Hebrew.”³

The Lord instructed the brother of Jared to “treasure up the things which ye have seen and heard, and show it to no man. And behold, when ye shall come unto me, ye shall write them and shall seal them up, that no one can interpret them; for ye shall write them in a language that they cannot be read” (Ether 3:21–22). Treasuring up and sealing up are parallel terms in this passage.

In *Jasher* 2:13 we read, “And in those days Cainan wrote upon tablets of stone, what was to take place in time to come, and he put them in his treasures.”⁴ The Falasha⁵ version of the *Testament of Abraham* begins with a declaration that “the holy ʾAtnātēwos, the patriarch of Alexandria, the servant of the only God, composed it from what he had found in the Treasury of Knowledge.”⁶

The Talmud reports that Rabbi Hanan bar Tahlifa sent a message to Rabbi Yosef saying that he had encountered a man who possessed an ancient prophetic text written in the holy language (Hebrew). The man claimed to have found the text among the hidden treasures of Rome while serving in the Roman army (see TB *Sanhedrin* 97b).⁷

Some texts indicate that there is a heavenly treasury in which records of the deeds of mankind are kept. Deuteronomy 32:34 speaks of the wicked acts of men being “laid up in store with God, and sealed up among [his] treasures.” In a medieval Hebrew text, Rabbi Ishmael (of the second century A.D.) re-

ported his visit to paradise, conducted by the angel Sagansagel, who “took me and brought me into the innermost place, to the treasure-house of treasures and he took down the books and showed me the decrees of many misfortunes written therein.”⁸ *Merkabah Rabbah* 195–98, also attributed to Rabbi Ishmael, calls God the “Sealer of all hidden things” and speaks of the “secret (name)” that “goes forth from Your treasure-house.”⁹ In another medieval Hebrew text, Moses was taken through the seven heavens to the presence of God, who declared, “I . . . have shown thee my treasures and I have given thee my law.”¹⁰ In Samaritan tradition, the book of the law is equated with the heavenly treasure.¹¹

Mandaean texts often speak of heaven as a treasury, usually a “treasury of light,” a term also known from Gnostic Coptic documents from Egypt. One text (*Thousand and Twelve Questions* 43–44) suggests that secret things are kept in the heavenly treasury:

For these mysteries with thee are guardians; were it not so, guardians of this treasure would come to thee and bring thee these mysteries at the command of my Father, the Great and Lofty One whose like none have beheld. Nevertheless, on the appointed days I will impart these mysteries to thee, for on those days these mysteries which thou hast (*mentioned?*) were (*created?*) . . . Then, from the presence of the Great and Lofty One, there came a decree that these mysteries should be given to *Šišlam*-Rba, and Mara-*d*-Rabutha commanded him to swear oaths that were strong and constraining. And he swore him (to secrecy) with those same oaths that his (own) Teacher had imposed upon him. In like manner *Šišlam*-Rba swore: “These mysteries I will not reveal. Nevertheless, to whom amongst us shall I reveal them?”¹²

The text then responds to the question by describing how any who would receive the heavenly secrets will be examined for worthiness.

Scrolls Kept in the Temple

Elder Orson Pratt suggested that the records of the Nephites had been hidden up and kept “under the charge of holy angels, until the day should come for them to be transferred to the sacred temple of Zion.”¹³ His brother, Elder Parley P. Pratt, wrote of a room inside the New Jerusalem temple that would be set aside to hold these and other sacred records.¹⁴

Some evidence suggests that sacred scrolls were also stored in the ancient temple in Jerusalem. In the days of King Josiah (circa 640–609 B.C.), a scroll of the Law (Torah) was discovered in the temple (see 2 Kings 22:8–20; 2 Chronicles 34:15–32). More than seven centuries later, the Jewish historian Josephus appealed to the “books laid up in the temple” as confirmation of what he had written.¹⁵

According to *Pseudo-Aristeas* 176, when the Jews of Alexandria wanted to translate the Bible into Greek, the high priest in Jerusalem sent them a copy of the Torah for that purpose. Evidently, the Hebrew copies of the Torah in Alexandria were considered to be corrupt (see *Pseudo-Aristeas* 30).

Rabbinic sources mention the “book of the Temple Court,” apparently a standard scroll for public reading on holy days. They also mention the books of the prophets in the temple court. Corrections of the book of the temple court were maintained from the public treasury (see TY *Šeqalim* 48a). One passage speaks of correcting the temple scroll itself (see Mishnah *Mo'ed Qatan* 3.4). The Jerusalem Talmud notes that in the temple in Jerusalem were three copies of the Torah that did not agree with one another in all particulars, and that when two

of the three agreed in a given passage, the rule of majority applied.¹⁶

The idea of keeping books in the sanctuary actually predates Solomon's building of the temple in Jerusalem. The tables of the law of Moses were kept in the ark of the covenant inside the tabernacle and later in the temple in Jerusalem (see Deuteronomy 10:1–5; 1 Kings 8:9; 2 Chronicles 5:10). When the prophet Samuel chose Saul as Israel's first king, he "told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the Lord," evidently in the tabernacle of Moses, then still in use (1 Samuel 10:25).

In *Life of Adam and Eve* 50:1–2, we read that Eve, before her death, instructed her posterity to make tablets of stone and clay and to write on them the life of their parents. Accordingly, Seth made the two types of tablets and wrote on them the life of his parents and their teachings. He placed them in the house of his father and they were seen by many after the flood. Solomon prayed about them and was told by an angel to build the temple on the site where they were kept.

Egyptian Temple Libraries

The Egyptians, too, kept their sacred texts in temples. In 1931 a cache of papyri from the second century was found in the basement of a house adjacent to the temple of Suchos in Tebtunis (modern Umm el-Breigat).¹⁷ One of these, Papyrus Petese, in a very fragmentary portion of the text, speaks of "hidden books which came into existence in the temple," where "the treasuries of [the sun-god] Re" were also located.¹⁸

Chapter 2, "Hidden Books," noted that chapter 137 of the Egyptian Book of the Dead speaks of "the instructions which are found in the books of Prince Herutātāf, who discovered them in a secret coffer (now they were in the handwriting of

the god [Thoth] himself (*i.e.*, they were written in hieroglyphs) and had been deposited in the Temple of the goddess Unnut, the Lady of Unu) during a journey which he was making in order to inspect the temples, and the temple-estates, and the sanctuaries of the gods.”¹⁹

Egyptian scribes copied the sacred books in the “house of life,” a library attached to the nearby temple. One such library was discovered intact in the temple of Horus at Edfu. The temple itself was constructed between 237 and 57 B.C., but its library dates from 140 to 124 B.C. Inscribed on its inner walls and dedicated to Horus was a two-part catalogue of all the books kept in the room.²⁰ One of the inscriptions suggests that the papyrus scrolls were kept in “caskets,” reminding us of the stone box in which the Book of Mormon plates were deposited.²¹

The Christian chronographer Syncellus, who lived around A.D. 800, is the sole source for the *Book of Sôthis*, or *The Sôthic Cycle*. Though the book was probably written in the fourth century A.D., Syncellus suggested that it had been written by the third-century-B.C. Egyptian priest Manetho, who presented it to King Ptolemy Philadelphus. According to this story, when the king wanted to learn the future of the universe, Manetho sent to him sacred books that had originally been written by Thoth, the first Hermes, in Egyptian hieratic script. After the flood, these books had been translated by Agathodaemôn, son of the second Hermes, or Hermes Trimegistus, and deposited in Egyptian temples.²² The books of Thoth kept in the temples of Egypt were also noted by Plato (see *Phaedra* 274d) and Philo of Byblos (see fragment 1, 805.8–10).²³

Other Temple Libraries

Other peoples also kept records in their temples. William J. Hamblin, citing Plutarch (see *Moralia*: “Quaestiones Convivales,” 5.2, 675B) notes that “a golden book containing the poetry of Aristomache of Erythrae, was deposited in the Treasury of the Sicyonians at Delphi.”²⁴ The second-century writer Lucian, in his *Alexander the False Prophet* 10, wrote of the discovery of a record written on bronze tablets that had been buried inside the temple of Apollo in Chalcedon.²⁵

A bronze tablet (18C) found during archaeological excavations at the Hittite capital of Hatti is inscribed with a treaty that notes at the end, “This document is made in seven copies and is sealed with the seal of the Sun-goddess of Arinna and the seal of the Storm-god of Hatti. One tablet is deposited in the presence of the Sun-goddess of Arinna, one tablet in the presence of the Storm-god of Hatti, one tablet in the presence of Lelwani, one tablet in the presence of Hebat of Kizzuwatna, one tablet in the presence of the Storm-god of Lightning, and one tablet in the presence of Zithariya. And Karunta, king of the land of Tarhuntassa, has one tablet in his residence” (§28 iv 44–51).²⁶

The Sikhs keep their sacred scriptures, the *Adi Granth* (First Book) in the “golden temple,” the temple of God (Hari-Mandir) at Amritsar, in the Punjab province of India. To reach the shrine, which is on an island, one must wade through the “tank of the immortals,” or the “pool of immortality,” an artificial tank 510 feet long in the center of which stands the island.²⁷

Even Latter-day Saints have used temples as repositories for records. Various relics, including written records, were placed in a record stone near the southeast corner of the Salt Lake Temple in 1857, and others were included in the capstone of the central eastern tower (where the statue of the angel

Moroni sits) in 1892. The contents of the cornerstone were removed in 1993, during the temple's centennial.²⁸

Summary

Though to modern readers it seems strange to read of books being kept in a treasury, the practice is ancient and is attested in numerous documents unknown in Joseph Smith's time. Thus another unusual pronouncement in the Book of Mormon is confirmed.

Notes

1. The Mandaeans, who number a few ten thousand in Iraq and Iran, claim to be the descendants of the disciples of John the Baptist. Their religion contains many elements common to early Christianity, Judaism, and pagan religions of ancient Mesopotamia.

2. See Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 174–75.

3. Frank Williams, trans., *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1987), 1:124.

4. *The Book of Jasher* (Salt Lake City: J. H. Parry and Co., 1887), 4.

5. The Falasha are the “black Jews” of Ethiopia. Some of their writings, such as the *Testament of Abraham*, were borrowed from their Christian neighbors.

6. Wolf Leslau, *Falasha Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 96.

7. The Roman historian Tacitus recorded the story of a lunatic named Caselius Bassus, who came from Carthage in North Africa to visit the emperor Nero in Rome. Bassus claimed to have discovered on his estate a very deep cave containing a large amount of gold bullion hidden away by the Phoenician queen Dido when she fled to Carthage after the Trojan war. The greedy emperor dispatched warships full of men to retrieve the gold. Bassus took them from place to place, digging up the ground in a futile search for the cave. He then

admitted that it had all been a hallucination. See Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* 16.

8. Moses Gaster, *Studies and Texts* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971), 1.162.

9. Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), 75.

10. Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1946), 40, citing the text published by Moses Gaster, "Hebrew Visions of Hell and Paradise," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1893): 571–611.

11. See A. E. Cowley, ed., *The Samaritan Liturgy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 1:49, 55, cited in Widengren, *Ascension of the Apostle*, 45.

12. E. S. Drower, *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960), 124.

13. O. Pratt, "The Hill Cumorah; or the Sacred Depository of Wisdom and Understanding," *Millennial Star* 28 (1866): 417.

14. See Parley P. Pratt, *The Angel of the Prairies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1880), 20–21. I am indebted to Matthew B. Brown for bringing to my attention the information about the Pratt brothers.

15. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 5.1.17, 3.1.7; see *Jewish War* 7.5.5.

16. See *TY Ta'anit* 4.2; compare *Sipre* 2.356; *Soperim* 6.4; *'Abot de Rabbi Nathan* 2.46.

17. See Jürgen Osing, *Hieratische Papyru aus Tebtunis I* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1998), 19.

18. K. Ryholt, *The Story of Petese, Son of Petetum and Seventy Other Good and Bad Stories* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1999), 53.

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

20. See Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 57.

21. For a discussion of boxes as repositories for sacred texts, see chapter 3 of this volume, “Hiding Records in Boxes.”

22. See W. G. Waddell, *Manetho* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), xxvii-xxviii, 209–11.

23. See Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 32 n. 115. For a discussion of the Hermetic literature, see chapter 2 of this volume, “Hidden Records.”

24. William J. Hamblin, “Sacred Writings on Bronze Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean” (FARMS, 1994), 13.

25. See A. M. Harmon, trans., *Lucian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 4:189.

26. Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 123.

27. E. Royston Pike, “Amritsar,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Religions* (New York: Meridian, 1958), 16.

28. See Matthew B. Brown and Paul Thomas Smith, *Symbols in Stone: Symbolism on the Early Temples of the Restoration* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant, 1997), 127.