Seals, Symbols, and Sacred Texts: Sealing and the Book of Mormon

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Second Nephi 27:7 tells us: “And it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall bring forth unto you the words of a book, and they shall be the words of them which have slumbered. And behold the book shall be sealed.” When we picture the gold plates we may think of Arnold Friberg’s painting of Moroni praying before burying the plates, or perhaps of one of several portrayals of Joseph Smith receiving the plates from Moroni. These images would perhaps remind us of Moroni’s statement that he would “seal up” the plates (Moroni 10:2). Second Nephi 27:6–22 offers a prophecy of the coming forth of this sealed book. I would like to discuss in some detail what 2 Nephi 27 says about that seal, to evaluate what type of seal can fit Nephi’s description, and to consider if and how that seal has any meaning for readers of the text of the Book of Mormon today.

As other papers in this volume make clear, 2 Nephi 27 is a prophecy written by Nephi in which he draws heavily on the text of Isaiah 29. In fact, most of Isaiah 29 is present in chapters 26 and 27 of Second Nephi, though Nephi adds significantly to the text and rearranges some of the verses from Isaiah 29. Within this larger prophecy, 2 Nephi 27:6–22 contains Nephi’s specific prophecy of the coming forth of a book in the last days. The most famous passages of this section relate to the declaration of a learned man that he cannot read a sealed book, which was historically fulfilled by Martin Harris’s visit to Charles Anthon. Thorough studies have worked carefully through the historical documents relating to this visit, but because modern history does not bear immediately on the question of the seal mentioned in the same verses, I will not discuss such questions here.

Instead I want to focus my attention on the many references to seals in verses 6–22, as well as on how those descriptions can enrich our understanding of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. As will be seen, although the image of the seal suggests something quite material or physical, Nephi’s employment of this image will consistently press us in the direction of the spiritual or the symbolic. Rather than presenting us, however, with simple symbols, Nephi’s image of the seal provides the reader with a rich intersection of themes that have much to teach us about the meaning of the Book of Mormon.

Preliminarily, though, it should be noted that verses 7 and 10 make clear that more than one seal is under discussion in Nephi’s prophecy. A first seal apparently seals the entire book (verse 7: “And behold the book shall be sealed”); verse 10: “the book shall be sealed by the power of God”). A second seal, however, seems to bind up only a part of the book, namely, the part that is usually referred to as the “sealed portion” of the plates. According to the text, “in the book shall be a revelation from God from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof” (verse 7), and this specific revelation has a seal of its own (verse 10: “the revelation which was sealed shall be kept in the book”). Thus we have both a sealed book and a sealed revelation (the latter sealed independently of but contained within the former).

Some further preliminaries—primarily concerning the Hebrew behind Isaiah 29:11—need attention. Isaiah 29:11 introduces the metaphor on which Nephi so heavily draws: “the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed.” This sentence is not itself present in Nephi’s text, but it is nonetheless the origin of several other statements by Nephi. The Hebrew word in Isaiah 29:11 for “book” is sfr, a word that can mean scroll or document (and refers to any official or documented information). The word derives from a root that originally meant “to count” (in the sense of taking a census), coming later to mean “to account” or “to recount,” that is, to
write a history or a narrative. The Hebrew word used in turn for “seal” in Isaiah 29:11 is htn. This verb means, straightforwardly, to seal a document, and the noun (hotan) derived from it can mean either a seal placed on a document or a signet-ring used to impress the seal. Seals “both protected the integrity of the contents [of a document] and served to identify the sealer as author, witness, agent, buyer, or seller, depending on the contents and purpose of the text.” Importantly, in Isaiah 29:11 it is “the vision of all” that has become like an inaccessible document to Israel. The Hebrew phrase behind the kjv’s “the vision of all” is chzwt hkl, a literal translation of which would be “the vision of the whole.” Although he omits this specific phrase from his direct quotation of Isaiah 29, Nephi does claim that “in the book shall be a revelation from God, from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof” (2 Nephi 27:7). For Nephi, it seems, Isaiah’s “vision of all” is to be likened to this “revelation from God.”

With these preliminaries out of the way, what can be said about the nature of the seals in Nephi’s text? A first approach draws on the use of seals in Isaiah’s Old World context, since it was from Isaiah that Nephi derived his discussion. In the Old Testament sealed scrolls are used for royal orders and official documents, such as deeds of sale and even marriages. Whatever method was used, the seal consisted of an impressionable substance (usually clay or wax) and the image impressed on it (usually by a stone, ring, or cylinder). The clay ensured that the document could not be accessed without leaving evidence of the tampering. Moreover, the impression on the clay provided authentication of the origin of the document. Examples of this type of sealed scroll can be found in various Old Testament texts.

It should be noticed that the type of seal here under discussion is not a strong physical barrier. Anyone can break such a seal and access the writing supposedly protected within. But like seals on bottles of medicine today, these ancient seals were intended less to prevent physical access to the contents than to make clear that unauthorized access had taken place. Just as the seal on a bottle of medicine today often reads, “Do not use if seal is broken,” the seal on a document anecdotally could be said to say, “Do not trust the contents if seal is broken.” The ancient seal, then, was more a symbolic than a physical barrier, a symbol of textual integrity and authority. For a document to be authentic, it had first to be sealed by authority and then transmitted without mishap to the correct recipient—the only one who was authorized to open the seal. Only then could the contents be revealed and accepted as authentic. Sealing a document in the Old Testament functioned in a way similar to notarizing a document today by authenticating its veracity.

As a metaphor, this type of seal would be appropriate for the gold plates (“the book”) because they were (1) sealed by someone with authority (Moroni), (2) transferred without mishap to an intended individual (through the buried box), and (3) read by that authorized recipient (and him alone). Importantly, this metaphorical understanding of what Nephi describes as the seal on the gold plates as a whole only works as a metaphor: no literal impressed wax or clay seal is historically attested for the plates as a whole.

Other interpretive possibilities deserve mention. Occasionally, the Old Testament uses the phrase “sealed up” to mean “hidden” rather than “notarized” (though such usage never has reference to texts). Since in 2 Nephi 27:22 Nephi records the Lord’s command to Joseph Smith that, after the work of translation was complete, he was to “seal up the book again, and hide it up unto me, that I may preserve the words which thou hast not read, until I shall see fit in mine own wisdom to reveal all things unto the children of men,” at least part of the significance of the seal on the book is the hiddenness and silence that surrounded the plates. Another possibility can be derived from the Gospel of Matthew. After Jesus was laid in the sepulchre, some of the chief priests and Pharisees said to Pilate “Sir, we remember that that deceIVER said, while he was yet alive, After
three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulcher be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away. . . . So they went, and made the sepulcher sure, sealing the stone and setting a watch” (Matthew 27:62–66, emphasis mine). The idea in this text, clearly, is that someone trying to remove the body of Jesus would have to break the seal, thus leaving evidence of tampering. The seal was meant to serve as insurance against false claims of a miraculous resurrection; ironically, it eventually served as proof that the resurrection was not a deception. Like Jesus’s body, the gold plates were placed in a stone receptacle covered by a rock. And, like Jesus’s body, the plates were accessible only through divine means (the angel Moroni). It could thus be that the seal on the book discussed by Nephi is meant to be taken as proving that the gold plates were not part of a deception, since only divine figures could reveal the location of the plates.

As much as the first interpretive approach above, these last two possibilities remain appropriate to the gold plates only as metaphors. Because each of the interpretive possibilities outlined so far deal with physical seals, they cannot make sense of moments in Nephi’s prophecy like the instance of Martin Harris’s explaining that he could not “bring the book” to Charles Anthon “for it is sealed” (2 Nephi 27:17).

Here let us turn to the second of the two seals Nephi describes, the seal described not as sealing the gold plates as a whole, but only sealing what Latter-day Saints commonly refer to as the “sealed portion” of the plates, the part of the record that Joseph Smith did not translate. The sealed portion is so named because there are documented, modern claims that there was a seal on part of the plates. Joseph Smith himself stated: “These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long . . . ; 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.” Sadly, this description does not tell us what the seal looked like, or even whether it was physical in nature, and other historical evidence is ambiguous. Because of the problematic evidence, Robert J. Matthews suggested that the sealed portion was removable from the rest of the plates. Claims that the seal around the sealed portion was a metal band come from late interviews with David Whitmer. Brant Gardner, though, contends that no physical seal existed on either the gold plates or the sealed portion. He suspects that David Whitmer was remembering the stories about the plates rather than his own experience of them.

Turning to what the Book of Mormon itself has to say on the subject, one finds references to the sealing of the plates in a number of texts. In two of these (2 Nephi 27:22; Ether 5:1), Joseph Smith is told to not “touch” what is sealed. The emphasis here lies in the physical act of touching rather than the visual act of reading or even translating. This emphasis of the physical act suggests that there was a physical element to the seal on the sealed portion. In line with this, the most descriptive passages in the Book of Mormon about seals on the record are those that deal with the seal, which specifically seals the “sealed portion” (rather than on the gold plates as a whole). I would like to look at these passages carefully, turning only afterward to passages that deal with the seal on the gold plates as a whole, thus allowing insights from the latter texts to inform our reading of the former.

When the brother of Jared sealed up the record of his vision, he included two stones with it: “And behold, these two stones will I give unto thee, and ye shall seal them up also, with the things which ye shall write” (Ether 3:23). Moroni comments later that the Lord “commanded me that I [too] should seal them up; and he also hath commanded that I should seal up the interpretation thereof; wherefore I have sealed up the interpreters [the stones], according to the commandment of the Lord” (Ether 4:5). That the stones had to be sealed up along with the record suggests that the act of sealing the “sealed portion” was in some sense or at least in part physical. But in addition to the physical aspect of this seal, one detects in these passages a “linguistic” aspect: the language was, in
addition to and like the physical part of the plates in question, sealed. Joseph received two stones (eventually called the Urim and Thummim) that were sealed up with the text, stones that he used for translating not the sealed portion (as was their stated intent) but the unsealed portion of the gold plates. Because the Urim and Thummim, at least in the beginning stages of translation, were necessary to translate the unsealed part of the text, we can conclude that the same linguistic seal on the sealed portion also existed on the plates as a whole. Just as the text sealed by the brother of Jared was written in a language that could not be read because it had been (divinely) confounded (see Ether 3:21–24; cf. 1 Nephi 14:26), the gold plates were also written in a language that could not be read—not necessarily because the language had been confounded, but because the language did not exist anywhere else.

This linguistic seal is arguably also related to a “visual” seal: the plates remained “hid” from the world because Joseph Smith was commanded not to show them. The transcription of gold plates’ characters taken by Martin Harris to Charles Anthon is described in 2 Nephi 27:15 as “these words which are not sealed.” The transcription was not sealed (the transcribed characters of the unknown language were visually accessible), but, because Anthon could not translate the transcribed text, it seems that a linguistic seal of sorts remained in place. Even if Charles Anthon had had some familiarity with the language of the plates, being able to decipher characters is not the same as having authority to translate. To break the linguistic seal, a seer was needed, someone who would render the translation “a marvelous work” (2 Nephi 27:25) rather than an academic achievement.

Interestingly, 2 Nephi 27:1–5 describes the deplorable state of the world “in the last days, or in the days of the Gentiles” as being in part a consequence of a general rejection of “the prophets” and “the seers.” I do not believe that the mention of prophets and seers in this passage—immediately preceding Nephi’s description of the coming forth of the sealed book—is irrelevant or accidental. According to Mosiah 8:13, a seer is someone who has the ability to translate unknown languages. A seer is so named because of his or her ability to “see” what others cannot see. Though not in 2 Nephi 27, Joseph Smith is called a seer in several other places in scripture, including 2 Nephi 3:6. A large part of Joseph’s role as a seer seems to have been to see what was sealed and “hid from the eyes of the world.”

The linguistic and visual aspects of the seal—in addition to forcing us away from strictly physical questions in favor of more spiritual or metaphorical interpretations of Nephi’s language—suggest to me a relationship between power with regard to language and righteousness. Interestingly, the qualification for breaking the seals of the heavenly scroll in Revelation 4–5 is righteousness: after John sees the scroll and its seals, the angel asks, “Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?” (Revelation 5:2), suggesting that only the righteous can have authority to open a text sealed by God. Significantly, 2 Nephi 27 portrays the unrighteous figure of the learned man as illegitimately claiming a kind of guardianship or mastery over language (2 Nephi 27:15: “the learned shall say: Bring hither the book, and I will read them”). The learned man in 2 Nephi 27 is thus like the scribes in the New Testament who “search the scriptures,” thinking that “in them” they “have eternal life,” but who are wrong because the scriptures “are they which testify of [Christ]” (John 5:39). The scribes believe that they have jurisdiction over the text, but it is Christ, not they, who teaches “as one having authority” (Matthew 7:29).

This discussion of seals in 2 Nephi 27 seems, in the end, to have come back to the question of authority, something I introduced early on, but only in a passing comment. I would like to conclude this study by looking briefly at how the question of authority, with regard to the seal, might deepen the meaning of Nephi’s discussion. I might introduce this last, brief, somewhat speculative aspect of my discussion by noting simply that there is reason to
explore the connection between sealing a text and the employment of what Latter-day Saints call the “sealing power” of the priesthood. But is such a connection justified?

In 2 Nephi 27:10, Nephi says that “the book shall be sealed by the power of God.” Interestingly, Nephi here seems to anticipate Joseph Smith, who explained in a letter that would become section 128 of the Doctrine and Covenants that the sealing power is a question first and foremost of writing. Describing the records that must be kept when the Saints undertake to create a “welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children” (D&C 128:18), Joseph claimed that the order of record producing and record keeping had been “prepared before the foundation of the world” (D&C 128:5). This order, he explains, was organized according to an

“ordinance [that] consists in the power of the priesthood, by the revelation of Jesus Christ, wherein it is granted that whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Or, in other words, taking a different view of the translation, whatsoever you record on earth shall be recorded in heaven, and whatsoever you do not record on earth shall not be recorded in heaven for out of the books shall your dead be judged…. And as are the records on the earth in relation to your dead, which are truly made out, so also are the records in heaven. This, therefore, is the sealing and binding power, and, in one sense of the word, the keys of the kingdom, which consist in the key of knowledge.” (D&C 128:8, 14)

One might, in light of this text, go so far as to suggest that the reason Joseph Smith was required to seal up the plates after translation (see 2 Nephi 27:22) was to return the Nephite record to its sealed status, allowing it to remain sealed in heaven, making it “a law on earth and in heaven” (D&C 128:9).

In the end, I would argue that what keeps so many people from taking the Book of Mormon seriously is not what it says, but the way in which it says it—because of its claim to authority. Joseph Smith’s testimony at the beginning of the Book of Mormon makes an extraordinary claim about the origin of the book and the authenticity of the translation. The (ancient) title page makes a similarly extraordinary claim about the authority of the book. These, along with the testimonies of the three and eight witnesses, serve as so many notarizations of the book, asserting its genuineness and authenticity. Whatever physical and spiritual seals have ultimately been placed on whatever parts of the gold plates, we are still faced with the reality that, in order to access the promises the book makes, we have to accept the possibility of its origin, authenticity, and authority. Only the believing can break the seals that keep the riches of the Book of Mormon “hid from the world.”

And, still more demanding, if and when we receive a witness of the truthfulness of this book’s claim, we in turn are called upon to become witnesses, to become ourselves, as it were, part of the seal that notarizes and testifies of the truth of the book. There where the symbol of authenticity, the authority of access, and the ability to interpret intersect, we can only hope that we, when the books are opened and the judgment is decided, shall be found.

NOTES

2. A generally accepted reading of the specific fulfillment of this prophecy is as follows:

Verse 15: "him to whom [the Lord] shall deliver the book" (Joseph Smith)

Verse 15: "another" to whom the above delivers the words (Martin Harris)

Verse 15: "the learned" man who receives the words from "another" (Charles Anthon)

Verse 13: "a few" who view the book (the three witnesses)

Verse 14: "as many witnesses" (the eight witnesses)


5. Ibid., 367–68.


7. See, for instance, Young's Literal Translation: "And the vision of the whole is to you," etc.

8. Note that revelations or visions "of the whole" are often written down and sealed up in scripture. Examples can be found in Daniel 12, Revelation 4–5, and Ether 3–6. Note in particular that Nephi himself knew of John's apocalypse. See 1 Nephi 14:27.

9. To take a couple: In 1 Kings 21, King Ahab desires to buy a vineyard the owner does not want to sell. Jezebel, the king's wife, therefore "wrote letters (spr) in Ahab's name, and sealed (htn) them with his seal (htn), and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles" (1 Kings 21:8). These letters effectively produced false witnesses against the owner so that he would be executed, making the vineyard available to Ahab. Such is the power of the seal. In another Old Testament text, this one from the book of Jeremiah, we find a detailed explanation of a property purchase: "And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that was in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver. And I subscribed the evidence, and sealed [htn] it, and took witnesses, and weighed him the money in the balances" (Jeremiah 32:9–10). After weighing the money, Jeremiah makes two copies of the purchase agreement. One he keeps, and the other one, the sealed copy of the deed of sale, is "put in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days" (Jeremiah 32:14). Jeremiah's precautions demonstrate again the power of the seal. See also John W. Welch and Kelsey D. Lambert, "Two Ancient Roman Plates," BYU Studies 45/2 (2006): 54–76.

10. This is further substantiated by a statement on the title page of the Book of Mormon: the gold plates were "Written and sealed up, and hid up unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed—To come forth by the gift and power of God unto the interpretation thereof—Sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile."

12. Importantly, the image of the seal already functions in Isaiah 29 as a metaphor: the vision had become “as the words of a book that is sealed.” If the seal set on the gold plates as described in 2 Nephi 27 must ultimately be regarded as metaphorical, it would mark Nephi’s continuity with, rather than departure from, Isaiah.


14. Robert J. Matthews, *Selected Writings of Robert J. Matthews* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 339. This would leave one wondering why, if the sealed portion were removable, Moroni would have given that part of the book to Joseph Smith at all. Note that while George Q. Cannon claimed that “about one-third” of the plates was sealed, Orson Pratt claimed that “about two-thirds” of the plates was sealed. Of course, neither of these men was a witness, nor did either of them explain where he obtained his information. See Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 320.

15. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 6:218–24. As evidence against a physical seal, Gardner points out that though Emma Smith described rustling, through a cloth covering, the pages of the plates with her thumb, she said nothing of a non-rustleable part of the plates; and that neither the three nor the eight witnesses said anything about a sealed portion of the plates in their accounts of seeing and handling the plates.


17. Most historians conclude that Joseph Smith used the Urim and Thummim for the first stages of translation but then used the seer stone for the majority of the translation, especially after the loss of the 116 pages. See, for example, Matthew B. Brown, *Plates of Gold: The Book of Mormon Comes Forth* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2003), 164–65.

18. Another connection between the seer and the text that is lost on us in English is that the words vision and seer are cognates in Hebrew: to see a vision is to see a seeing.


20. See Moses 6:5–7. Certainly, it is significant that God created all things either literally by speaking (“Let there be . . .”) or through the Word—Jehovah. The power of God is unquestionably connected to language, and it would seem quite naturally to follow that only those with authority from God can exercise the use of language authoritatively.

21. The Hebrew for “learned” literally means “one who knows books” (ydh sfr). Thus Young’s Literal Translation of Isaiah 29:11–12 reads: “And the vision of the whole is to you, As words of the sealed book, That they give unto one knowing books, Saying, ’Read this, we pray thee,’ And he hath said, ‘I am not able, for it [is] sealed;’ And the book is
given to him who hath not known books, Saying, 'Read this, we pray thee,' And he hath said, 'I have not known books.'"

22. Note that the definition of the "sealing power" employed in this text is echoed in the Book of Mormon itself. See, for example, Helaman 10:7: "Behold, I give unto you power, that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven; and thus shall ye have power among this people."

23. See, for example, Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4: "What the Book of Mormon claims to be is so radical that the storm of controversy over its origins and authenticity has almost completely obscured the book itself.”

24. This suggests that Joseph Smith was himself the seal in question, that he took the place of the seal on the plates when Moroni delivered the plates to him. This interpretation can explain certain moments in Nephi’s prophecy like the instance of Martin Harris’s explaining that he could not "bring the book" to Charles Anthon "for it is sealed" (2 Nephi 27:17). Interestingly, the fact that the Book of Mormon text had to command Joseph Smith to “touch not the things which are sealed” seems to suggest that, had Joseph so desired, he could have had some kind of access to the sealed portion (see Mosiah 8:13). Perhaps Joseph Smith himself became the seal on the plates in that he made a promise not to touch what he could have touched had he chosen to do so.

25. It is noteworthy that verses 12–14 of 2 Nephi 27 clarify the role and purpose of the witnesses. Verse 12 explicitly states that “the eyes of none shall behold [the book] save it be that three witnesses shall behold it, by the power of God . . . and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein.” In verse 13 Nephi writes, “There is none other which shall view it, save it be a few according to the will of God to bear testimony of his word unto the children of men.” In both descriptions, the witnesses are given visual access to the plates as well as acting as notaries verifying the truth and authority of the book.