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Title Some Problems of Interest Relating to the Brass Plates

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Abstract Most contemporary Old Testament scholars question whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch, but the Book of Mormon affirms Moses' authorship. Questions arise as to how Jeremiah's prophecies appeared on the brass plates and what the nature of the Book of the Law was. According to the brass plates, Laban and Lehi were descendants of Manasseh. How then did they come to be living in Jerusalem? The brass plates, on which may be found lost scripture, may have been the official scripture of the ten tribes.

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The Book of Mormon relates that when Nephi and his brethren returned from Jerusalem with the brass plates,¹ their father Lehi proceeded to give the records a thorough examination (1 Nephi 5:10). It is a well-established fact that writing on metal plates was not an uncommon practice in the ancient world.² In his

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¹ The expression *brass plates* is never used in the Nephite record; good Palestinian idiom dictates *plates of brass*.

² See photograph of records of Darius in gold and silver at the beginning of my *Ancient Records Testify in Papyrus and Stone* (Salt Lake City: General Boards of MIA of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1938); 1 Maccabees 8:21-22; Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 105-7; Ariel L. Crowley, "Metal Record Plates in Ancient Times," in *Statement of Beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Idaho City, ID: Deseret News Press, 1961),

search of the brass plates, Lehi discovered that they contained the "five books of Moses" as well as a record of the Jews from the beginning down to Zedekiah's reign; many of Jeremiah's prophecies were also found engraven on the sacred plates. Let us quote Nephi's exact words:

And after they had given thanks unto the God of Israel, my father, Lehi, took the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, and he did search them from the beginning.

And he beheld that they did contain the five books of Moses, which gave an account of the creation of the world, and also of Adam and Eve, who were our first parents;

And also a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah;

And also the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah; and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah.

And it came to pass that my father, Lehi, also found upon the plates of brass a genealogy of his fathers; wherefore he knew that he was a descendant of Joseph; yea, even that Joseph who was the son of Jacob, who was sold into Egypt, and who was preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he might preserve his father, Jacob, and all his household from perishing with famine. (1 Nephi 5:10-14)

I wish to call special attention to the words "prophecies which have been spoken *by the mouth* of Jeremiah," which occur in the paragraph. "By the mouth of" is assuredly not common English usage. We are not accustomed in our ordinary speech to say that we intend to consult prophecies spoken "by the mouth of" Isaiah, Jeremiah, or any other prophet. But the expression is a perfectly good Hebrew idiom and seems to have been translated liter-

122-45, has also published an interesting account concerning the ancient use of metal plates for writing purposes.

ally by Joseph Smith. The fact that it occurs in 2 Chronicles 36:21–22 and Ezra 1:1 does not necessarily mean that Joseph copied it from our common English version.

Lehi also discovered the genealogy of his fathers upon the brass records; he therefore knew that he was a descendant of Joseph who was sold into Egypt, through his son Manasseh (1 Nephi 5:14; Alma 10:3).

The Pentateuch

The statements of Nephi regarding the contents of the brass plates are extremely important to us because of present-day critical views respecting the Old Testament. Most contemporary Old Testament scholars severely question or deny completely that Moses wrote, or had written, the first five books of our Bible. But the Book of Mormon affirms the truth of the old Hebrew tradition that Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament, or the Pentateuch as we call it (1 Nephi 5:11; 2 Nephi 2:15–19; 3:4–10; Moses 1:40–41). The Nephite record (together with the book of Moses) shatters—for Latter-day Saints at least—current “critical” views regarding the date, authorship, and composition of the Pentateuch. Even the book of Deuteronomy, which many critics especially contend was written in the days of Josiah (ca. 621 B.C.), is of Mosaic origin, according to the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 22:20–21; 3 Nephi 20:23; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15, 18–19).

Jeremiah’s Prophecies

Many other interesting problems arise as a result of Nephi’s words concerning the brass plates. One wonders how Jeremiah’s prophecies found their place on the brass plates, since Laban, their former keeper, was a thoroughly unrighteous man. How did Jeremiah, or his scribe Baruch (Jeremiah 36:4), or some other representative of the prophet gain access to the plates in Laban’s treasury, in view of the difficulties which Nephi and his brothers had in getting at them? Were they aided and abetted by Zoram, the servant of Laban? We shall have to wait for more light before these questions can be answered.

The Book of the Law

Another problem arises because of the discovery of the Book of the Law, which was found in the temple in the days of Josiah, the king of Judah. Here is the biblical account of the discovery:

And it came to pass in the eighteenth year of king Josiah [ca. 621 B.C.], that the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah the son of Meshullam the scribe to the house of the Lord, saying;

“Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest, that he may sum the money which is brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the door have gathered of the people and let them deliver it into the hand of the workmen that have the oversight of the house of the Lord and let them give it to the workmen that are in the house of the Lord, to repair the breaches of the house unto the carpenters and to the builders and to the masons and for buying timber and hewn stone to repair the house”

—Howbeit there was no reckoning made with them of the money that was delivered into their hands: for they dealt faithfully. And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe: “I have found the book of the Law in the house of the Lord.” And Hilkiyah delivered the book to Shaphan and read it. And Shaphan the scribe came to the king and brought back word unto the king and said: “Thy servants have poured out the money that was found in the house and have delivered it into the hand of the workmen that have the oversight of the house of the Lord.” And Shaphan the scribe told the king saying “Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book.” And Shaphan read it before the king. And it came to pass when the king had heard the words of the book of the Law he rent his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest and Achbor the son of Shaphan and Achbor the son of Micaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah the king’s servant saying: “Go ye inquire of the Lord for me and the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this

book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us." (2 Kings 22:3–13, translation of Jewish Publication Society of America)

As a result of finding this book, King Josiah instituted a great reform (see 2 Kings 23:23–25). Now the question arises, what was the nature of the Book of the Law, which Josiah and his fathers had failed to heed? Many conservative scholars have held that it included the entire Pentateuch, while most of the critical scholars have held it to be the book of Deuteronomy. In view of the fact that King Josiah's reforms included in their scope a wider legislation than that found in Deuteronomy, it would seem probable that the book found in the temple included not only Deuteronomy but others, if not all, of the books of the Pentateuch.

As students of the Book of Mormon we ask ourselves, how does it happen that the Jews in the days of Josiah—at least up to 621 B.C.—were without the Book of the Law, inasmuch as the brass plates containing it were in the hands of Laban or one of his predecessors? Are we to suppose that the keepers of the brass plates deliberately withheld the Book of the Law from the Jews? They must have known they were without it. Such an action would seem strange because certain individuals were allowed access to the plates in order to write the prophecies of Jeremiah. Perhaps the Book of the Law was some other book than we have supposed, but that seems quite unlikely. At present, we are unable to answer, with any certainty, the questions I have asked. But they are interesting questions, and someday we shall probably obtain the answers to them.

The Brass Plates

Nephi makes another statement about the brass plates that arrests our attention. He says, "And Laban also was a descendant of Joseph, *wherefore he and his fathers had kept the records*" (1 Nephi 5:16). These words seem to indicate that the recording of the Hebrew scriptures on the brass plates had begun many generations before Laban's time, how many we know not. Further-

more, it would be kept in the senior tribe of Israel, that is to say, in the tribe of Ephraim (see Genesis 48:5, 13–20; 1 Chronicles 5:1–2). Laban may well have been a descendant of Joseph through Ephraim. We may properly ask ourselves how it happened that Laban—and Lehi's family, for that matter, inasmuch as they were descendants of Joseph through Manasseh—happened to be living in Jerusalem. The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, as the reader is well aware, had been allied generations before with the northern kingdom of Israel, not with Judah in the south. A reasonable answer to our question would be this: The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians when its capital of Samaria capitulated to Sargon II in 721 B.C. The forebears of Laban may well have fled to Jerusalem to prevent the sacred records from falling into alien hands. Lehi's grandfather or great-grandfather may have left his northern home for Jerusalem in order to prevent his children from intermarrying or making religious compromises with the foreigners brought into the land by the Assyrians. Such a course would not be unreasonable on the part of many devout families.

If the brass plates had been kept by Laban's ancestors in the tribe of Ephraim as early as the united kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon, it would be of great interest to know their history and that of any other sacred records subsequent to the division which took place after Solomon's death; it will be remembered that the northern confederation of tribes followed Jeroboam, and the southern kingdom of Judah remained under Rehoboam (1 Kings 11:29; 12:24). What happened to the keeping of sacred records when the Israelites became sharply divided on political grounds—so much so that the two nations were enemies? We remember the religious effects of the American Civil War upon the North and South when we ask the question. The prophets in both nations probably paid little attention to the political lines of division, but it is improbable that all of them had their words recorded in the scriptures of both nations. From the time of the division until the fall of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C., the brass plates may well have been the official scripture of the ten tribes. It is probable that some prophets wrote on these plates whose writings may not have been recorded on the records kept in Judah. Were Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and Ezias (1 Nephi 19:10;

Helaman 8:20) among them? They were all Hebrew prophets known to the Nephites, but their names do not appear in our current Old Testament.

It is also possible that the writings of some prophets in Judah were not placed on the brass plates during the period under consideration, but of this we have no way of knowing. But after the fall of Samaria, in 721 B.C., it is very probable that most Jewish prophetic writings were engraved on the brass plates, assuming, of course, that Laban's immediate forebears came to Jerusalem as we have already conjectured. It is a fact of considerable importance in biblical studies that the Book of Mormon indicates the presence on the brass plates of more scripture than that contained in our entire Bible (1 Nephi 13:23-26). Considering the fact that these plates recorded Hebrew scripture written only before the year 600 B.C., we have ample testimony to the loss of much scripture between that date and the present time.

When Lehi had searched the brass plates, he was filled with the Spirit and began to prophesy to the effect that the day would come when they should be made known unto all kindreds, tongues, and people who were of his seed (1 Nephi 5:17-18). Moreover, he prophesied that the brass plates should never perish or be dimmed by time (1 Nephi 5:19). We know, therefore, that many unknown or hitherto corrupted texts of Hebrew scripture will be restored to the world in correct form. To those of us who are interested in the study of the Bible, this is a comforting and even a thrilling prospect.