

The Book of Mormon and the Apocalypse of Paul

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When Joseph Smith proclaimed that he had seen God and Jesus Christ in the Sacred Grove in answer to his prayers, he was immediately subjected to ridicule and persecution from neighbors, strangers, and even ministers (see JS—H 1:21). Later an angel revealed to him the hiding place of an ancient scripture written on gold plates that were buried in a stone box. This was so bizarre to current beliefs of the day that the persecution increased,¹ since such a declaration was considered blasphemous.² However, an ancient Christian account of the discovery of the *Apocalypse of Paul* is similar to that of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, both involving the appearance of an angel to reveal the hiding-place of an ancient scripture buried in a stone box. The two accounts of the appearance of an angel are as follows.

Joseph Smith's Account (in Joseph Smith—History)

After retiring for the evening on 21 September 1823, young Joseph began to pray for forgiveness and to know of his standing before God. He noticed that the whole room began to increase in light until it was “lighter than at noonday” (JS—H 1:30). Then a heavenly messenger appeared at his bedside, introducing himself as Moroni, an ancient prophet who lived on the American continent some fourteen centuries earlier. “He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants” (JS—H 1:34).

Moroni informed Joseph of the location of a buried stone box containing an ancient record with accompanying relics. He gave Joseph specific instructions on what he was to do with the record and told him of the urim and thummim, that “God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book,” and that they consisted of two stones in silver bows, fastened to a breastplate. They had been deposited with the plates “and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times” (JS—H 1:35). Moroni appeared three times that evening.³

Later, Moroni instructed young Joseph to go to the spot where Moroni had deposited the record centuries earlier (see JS—H 1:51).⁴ So intense was the persecution that followed that Joseph had to be constantly on guard as enemies attempted to harm him and steal the plates (see JS—H 1:60).

Paul's Vision

The *Apocalypse of Paul*⁵ claims to be Paul's more detailed account of the vision mentioned in his second letter to the Corinthians. Paul was taken away in vision up to the “third heaven,” but was told not to reveal the experience to others.

It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in

the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. (2 Corinthians 12:1–4)

According to an ancient Christian tradition Paul did record this vision and then hid it for a later generation.⁶ Apparently a young man living in Tarsus discovered the account years after Paul recorded his vision. This account, the so-called Tarsus account preface or Tarsus Introduction now comprises the first two verses in the translation of the *Apocalypse of Paul* by Hugo Duensing and Aurelio de Santos Otero:

In the consulate of Theodosius Augustus the Younger and of Cynegius⁷ a certain respected man⁸ was living in Tarsus in the house which had once belonged to St. Paul; an angel,⁹ appearing to him by night, gave him a revelation telling him to break up the foundations of the house and to make public what he found. But he thought this was a delusion. However, the angel came the third time¹⁰ and scourged¹¹ him and compelled him to break up the foundations. And when he had dug he discovered a marble box¹² which was inscribed on the sides; in it was the revelation of St. Paul and the shoes¹³ in which he used to walk when he was teaching the word of God. But he was afraid to open the box and brought it to a judge;¹⁴ the judge accepted it and sent it as it was, sealed with lead, to the emperor Theodosius; for he was afraid it might be something else.¹⁵ And when the emperor received it he opened it and found the revelation of Saint Paul. After a copy had been made he sent the original manuscript to Jerusalem.”¹⁶

The Tarsus preface has been dated by Tischendorf to AD 380.¹⁷ Though others have dated it as early as AD 240–250,¹⁸ it is not later than AD 380.¹⁹ Constantin von Tischendorf is attributed with the modern rediscovery of Paul’s vision in 1843. He published the Greek text along with a partial English translation in 1866.²⁰ The *Apocalypse of Paul* became very popular and “the importance of (the Apocalypse of) Paul . . . increased from the eighth century, so that it became one of the chief formative elements in the development of the later legends of Heaven.”²¹ It was circulated from Armenia in the East to England in the West and translated into the major European languages. “There are versions approximating to the original in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, Armenian, and Slavic, in manuscripts ranging between the eighth and the seventeenth century.”²²

The similarity between the Joseph Smith narrative and the Tarsus account has now been recognized by at least one non-Latter-day Saint scholar, Willis Barnstone: “The details of the discovered scriptures [the *Apocalypse of Paul*] calls to mind the detailed evidence associated with the discovery of Mormon scriptures in New York state.”²³ Several details in the Tarsus account parallel the record of Moroni’s visits:

- **Both heavenly messengers visited three times in a single evening.**
- **The purpose of both heavenly visitations was to reveal the location of buried records.**
- **Both records were buried in sealed stone boxes.**
- **Both records were accompanied by other relics.**
- **Both Joseph and the young nobleman were told to make the records public.**

There are also some obvious differences between the two accounts:

- **We do not know if the young nobleman was a prophet.**

- We are unaware why Paul's record came forth at that time in history or if this angelic visitation was under any direct authority from God.²⁴
- Although relics were found in both boxes, they were considerably different.
- It is not clear on what medium the *Apocalypse of Paul* was written.

There is one clue to the medium on which Paul's record was written. In a footnote to Tischendorf's translated edition we read that when King Theodosius I opened the stone box and read Paul's account, "he saw thus *inscribed* . . ."²⁵ According to Webster, the word *inscribed* was used to describe the record and not the box, although the box was also "inscribed." *Inscribe* means to write, engrave, "or print as a lasting record," "engraving on, for perpetuity or duration; as to inscribe a line or verse on a monument, on a column or pillar." This statement and the fact that the record was buried in a stone box sealed with lead, which was also inscribed on the sides, provide possible clues for a record written on something other than papyrus. Based on research by William J. Hamblin and H. Curtis Wright,²⁶ it would seem that there is a distinct possibility that the description of this buried record in a stone box could provide evidence that Paul's vision was inscribed on metal plates. Also, as noted in Tischendorf's translation, it was thought that the box contained "something of gold." Why, we do not know. The weight of the box or the fact that the box was stone and sealed may have indicated that it contained something of value. In any event, none of the accounts delineate on what medium Paul's revelation was written.

In addition to the story of Paul's apocalypse, there is another account of an ancient apostle's record that was hidden up and buried for later generations, the *Apocalypse of Stephen*.²⁷ The apostle Peter had a similar vision of the heavens and hell, as found in the Ethiopic text of the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Peter was also instructed to hide it up once he had recorded it.²⁸

Whether the legend of the Tarsus account is factual or merely fabricated is not the issue.²⁹ What is important is that this ancient story provides many parallels to the Moroni account. Joseph Smith's story of the visit of an angel who disclosed the location of an ancient buried record is neither unique nor strange. Joseph's accounts of heavenly visitations, ancient records, gold plates, and accompanying relics correspond with accounts in certain ancient records. Many texts' apocryphal apocalypses deal with the same form of secrecy to protect both the sacred record and the uninitiated reader, and contain one or more elements that allow the record to come forth by divine control.

Tischendorf did not discover the record of Paul until 1843 in Germany and did not publish it until 1866, some twenty-two years after Joseph Smith's death. Perhaps the reason that Paul recorded his vision and the unique process by which it was later discovered and distributed was for the purpose of testifying to the modern enlightened world in some small way that God works the same way in all ages in establishing dispensations, including bringing forth the Book of Mormon. The Prophet Moroni testified:

Behold, I make an end of speaking concerning this people. I am the son of Mormon, and my father was a descendant of Nephi. And I am the same who hideth up this record unto the Lord; the plates thereof are of no worth, because of the commandment of the Lord. For he truly saith that no one shall have them to get gain; but the record thereof is of great worth; and whoso shall bring it to light, him will the Lord bless. For none can have power to bring it to light save it be given him of God; for God wills that it shall be done with an eye single to his glory, or the welfare of the ancient and long dispersed covenant people of the Lord.
(Mormon 8:13-15)

The original title page of the Book of Mormon, taken from the gold plates, further asserts:

Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites—Written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile—Written by way of commandment, and also by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation—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—The interpretation thereof by the gift of God.

In 1823 Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith and, under God’s direction, instructed him to take the plates, translate them, and make the record available to the world. The Book of Mormon is another testament of Jesus Christ. It is indeed a sacred record for our time for our enlightenment. As the ancient record of the Book of Mormon is a witness to the fact that God deals with his children consistently, so also perhaps is the process in which God brought forth this ancient record. This Book of Mormon has come to us through preparation and planning under divine direction and is of great importance to us.

Notes

This appendix is based on a brown-bag lecture sponsored by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), where the author is employed at the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (CPART).

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1. See Richard L. Anderson, “Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:214–15; Dean C. Jessee, “The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript,” *BYU Studies* 10/3 (1970): 259.
2. See “Great Discussion on Mormonism between Dr. West and Elder Adams, at the Marlboro’ Chapel,” *Times and Seasons* 3/19 (1 August 1842): 863–64. See also Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 270–71.
3. The next day the angel Moroni came a fourth time (see JS—H 1:49) and visited Joseph many more times over the years.
4. See also JS—H 1:52–53. For a detailed description of the stone box containing the ancient Nephite record see Oliver Cowdery’s Letter number 8 in *Messenger and Advocate* 2/1 (1835): 196.
5. The term *apocalypse* derives from the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning revelation. An apocalypse is a specific type of revelation that pertains to a genre of literature having specific references to eschatological theology. Another term that might need clarification is *apocrypha* or *apocryphal*. These terms have come to mean “spurious or untrue.” But this is not the meaning intended by those who anciently first applied the term. “An apocryphal book was—originally—one too sacred and *secret* to be in every one’s hands: it must be reserved for the initiate, the inner circle of believers.” Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), xiii–xiv, emphasis in original.
6. Richard L. Anderson wrote, “Apparently Paul’s detailed knowledge of the three heavens went to the grave with him.” See Richard L. Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 145. Note the conclusion of the record of the *Apocalypse of Paul*: “And I, Paul, returned unto myself, and I knew all that I had seen; and in life I had not rest that I might reveal this mystery; but I wrote it, and deposited it

under the ground and the foundation of the house of a certain faithful man, with whom I used to be in Tarsus, a city of Cillicia.” Constantin von Tischendorf, trans., *Augusto de Grimm: de Educandis Domus Caesareae Russicae Principibus Meritissimo* (Germany, 1866), 68.

7. Gratianus (or Gratian) in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1886; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 8:575. Gratianus was Co-Augustus with Theodosius I. Theodosius the Great was Emperor of the East (AD 379–395) and Gratianus was Emperor of the West (AD 375–383). See John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 388.
8. Rendered “a certain nobleman” in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:575 and “a certain honorable man” in James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 526.
9. Rendered “angel of the Lord” in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:575. According to PHEME PERKINS, the “instructions (were) given by an angel in a dress,” by which we should perhaps understand a robe. See David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:204. The Greek *himation* was the most common outer garment for both men and women. It was draped around the body. Also, the Greek *stole* was used as a “general term for the outer garment or long robe.” See Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:236.
0. Rendered “but a third time the angel came” in James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 526, and “the angel having persisted even to a third vision” in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:575.
1. Tischendorf notes that the Greek means “urged him.” Tischendorf, *Augusto de Grimm*, 69.
2. Tischendorf notes a translation describing the box as “a box of white glass.” *Ibid.*, According to Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8:575 n. 3, a Syriac version calls it “a box of white glass.” Casey referred to it as “a sealed marble box.” Robert P. Casey, “The Apocalypse of Paul,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1933): 6 n. 24.
3. In the *Apocalypses Pauli*, Tischendorf reads that the box contained “his (Paul’s) stockings placed by the side of this Revelation—these stockings he used to wear on his feet at the time of prayer—and his cloak folded up.” Tischendorf, *Augusto de Grimm*, 34 n. 2.
4. Also, “and having taken it, he showed it to the ruler of the city.” Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:5 Casey, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 6.
5. The Syriac version states that they thought the box contained gold. See Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:575 n. 4. See also Tischendorf, *Augusto de Grimm*, xv, where he notes that they were “thinking that there was something of gold within it.” However, it is rendered merely “something strange” in Carl H. Kraeling, “The Apocalypse of Paul and the ‘Iranische Erlösungsmysterium,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 24 (1931): 241.
6. The Latin version states that Theodosius sent the copy and kept the original. Casey, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 6. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 2:716–17. See also James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 526. James states that the Syriac version puts the discovery story at the end of the book.
7. Tischendorf, “Theological Studies,” u. Krit. XXIV, 442.
8. See Casey, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 1–32; Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:359.
9. See Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:358; and Theodore Silverstein, *Visio Sancti Pauli* (London: Christophers, 1935), 91. Silverstein states that the apocalypse was originally written in Greek and probably by an Egyptian and “as early as the third century, and was reissued some time after the year 388 with a preface that sought to support the authority of the book by relating the story of its miraculous discovery in Tarsus.” Silverstein, *Visio Sancti Pauli*, 3. Casey also dates the Tarsus account to AD 388. Casey, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 6. This date does not accord with that of the Tarsus account, which refers to the joint consulate of Theodosius and Gratianus. Gratianus was assassinated in 383 and replaced by Valentinian II. See John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*, 109–10, 388. However, Casey

points out that “M. R. James has rightly restored *Cynewgius* and fixed the intended date at AD 388,” Casey, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 6.

0. Tischendorf discovered a Long Greek version in Milan in 1843. Before he published the text in 1866, a second Greek manuscript was found in Munich. See Silverstein, *Visio Sancti Pauli* (London: Christophers, 1935), 15 n.; 98–99.
1. *Ibid.*, 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 4–5. See also Antonette DiPaolo Healey, ed., *The Old English Vision of St. Paul* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1978), 19. Kraeling states that “evidence of another sort indicates that in the later centuries, particularly from the thirteenth to the fifteenth, the document continued to be in vogue.” Kraeling, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 211.
3. Willis Barnstone, ed., *The Other Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 537.
4. LDS theology recognizes any heavenly angelic visitation would seem to be under the direction of God. See Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:40. However, there is still the matter of authenticity of the account itself.
5. Tischendorf, *Augusto de Grimm*, III Apocalypses Pauli, 35. See also Casey, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 6. Here Casey describes the Syriac (S1) text by stating that “it adds a long and edifying inscription found inside the box.”
6. See William J. Hamblin, “Sacred Writings on Bronze Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994); and H. Curtis Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:273.
7. Along with Stephen’s record were his relics. The text is dated around AD 415. See Schneemelcher, *The New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:694; James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 564–68; and Casey, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 6 n. 2.
8. According to Casey, in the Ethiopic text of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, “Jesus orders Peter to conceal his revelation in a box that men may not read it.” Casey notes that “It is unlikely that the detail of the box (in Paul’s account) was taken from Peter.” Casey, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 6. See also J. K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 612.
9. For a brief statement concerning the background of the early controversy relating to the origins for both the discovery account and the recorded vision of Paul, see James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 525. Kraeling refers to the Tarsus account as an “aetiological legend” from the fact that it provides time, place, purpose, and description, Kraeling, “Apocalypse of Paul,” 240–42.