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The Book of Mormon Plates

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Janne M. Sjodahl discusses how the Book of Mormon would have taken up less space on the plates than in its current translated and printed form. Because the plates were written in a language comparable to Hebrew, Sjodahl had fourteen pages of the English Book of Mormon translated into Hebrew and written out. This Hebrew text covered only one page. According to this finding, the Book of Mormon could be written using as few as twenty-one plates (or even forty-eight if written in larger characters). Sjodahl presents estimates of the size and weight of the plates.
As far as I know, we have no data from which to calculate, with any degree of accuracy, the number of plates contained in the original volume of the Book of Mormon, or their weight. And yet, such questions have been discussed seriously by unfriendly critics of the Book of Mormon. The Prophet Joseph does not enlighten us on that point, any more than Moses does on the size and weight of the stone tablets on which the law was engraved. The particulars furnished by the eye witnesses were given in answer to questions pressed upon them, in the course of what amounted almost to cross-examination, many years after they had seen the plates, and their figures could not be anything but vague estimates, in the absence of new revelations on the subject.

Suppose, for the sake of illustration, that two or more men should be asked the dimensions of a book they claim to have seen, say Webster's Dictionary, and...
that the question was put to them twenty years after
they had actually had it before them; what would the
result be? Each would give his own impression, un-
less, indeed, there had been collusion between them.

David Whitmer, in an interview in the Kansas
City Journal, not very long before his death, said of
the plates:

They appeared to be of gold, about six
by nine inches in size, about as thick
as parchment, a great many in num-
ber, and bound together like the
leaves of a book by massive rings
passed through the back edges.²

Martin Harris, according to Myth
of the Manuscript Found,² estimated
the plates at eight inches by seven
inches, and that the volume had a
thickness of about four inches, each
plate being about as thick as thick tin.

Orson Pratt had never seen the
plates, but owing to his intimacy
with the Prophet and the witnesses,
his word has great weight. He tells us
that the plates were eight by seven
inches, and that the volume was about six inches,
each plate being about as thick as tin.

Orson Pratt also tells us that two-thirds of the vol-
ume was sealed.

The question therefore is: Could one-third of a
volume of metal leaves, eight by seven inches, by
four (according to Martin Harris), or eight by seven
by six (Orson Pratt), contain enough plates, each as
thick as tin, to yield the necessary space for the en-
tire text of the Book of Mormon?

We have been told that this was utterly impossible.

Now look at the accompanying illustration [see
the illustration on p. 22, which has been reproduced
at actual size]. On a space seven by eight inches, my
friend, Brother Henry Miller, a Hebrew by birth, has
written with pen and ink fourteen pages of the Book
of Mormon text, translated into Hebrew, using the
square letters in which the Hebrew Bibles now are
printed. That is to say, the entire Book of Mormon,³
fourteen pages of the American text to each page of
Hebrew, could be written on 40³⁄₁₀ pages—21 plates
in all.

Brother Miller positively states that, even if the
compilers of the Book of Mormon used much larger
characters than he has used in this copy, they could
have engraved the entire text on 48 plates.

This may sound incredible to some, but in the
first place, the Hebrews anciently did not write the
vowels, as we do. They wrote only the consonants
and they did not leave a blank space between words.
That was an immense saving of space. In the second
place, they did not need as many small words to com-
plete a sentence as we do. And frequently the auxil-
ary words consisted of only one let-
ter, which was attached to the main
word, either as a prefix or suffix. Fi-
nally, they used many abbreviations
and that was another great saving of
space.

Now, if we allow fifty plates to an
inch, and four inches for the thickness
of the volume, we find that one-third
which was translated consisted of 66
or 67 plates. But as only 48 were actu-
ally needed, there is ample enough
margin to allow for large, readable
characters, and the necessary thick-
ness of each plate.

It is just as difficult to estimate
the weight of the plates as their number. Thirty-five
twenty-dollar gold pieces would cover a surface 8 by
7 inches. To make a column four inches high, 48
would be needed. That is to say, thirty-five times
forty-eight twenty-dollar gold pieces—1,680 in all—
would make up the dimensions of the plates, 8 by 7
by 4 inches. But each of these weighs, as I am in-
formed, 21½ pennyweights. That would make a to-
tal, if my figures are correct, of 123 pounds avoirdu-
pois.

But from this weight liberal deductions must be
made. The plates did not fit as closely together as
gold coins stacked up in columns. They were, in all
probability, hammered and not cast, and there would
be quite a space between each. Further, they were
not solid gold but an alloy. Nephi’s plates were made
of “ore,” and Moroni mentions “ore” as the material
of which his plates were made (1 Nephi 19:1; Mor-
mon 8:5). The ore certainly was considerably lighter
in weight than the refined gold would have been.
Then again, some allowance must be made for the
metal cut away from every plate by the engraver.
Everything considered, the entire volume could not
have weighed a hundred pounds even if we accept
the dimensions given as the actual measurements.
But they were not. They were only approximations.
The question may also be approached from a different angle. If the entire text was written on 48 plates, then the book contained only 144 leaves, since two-thirds were sealed up. But if 200 leaves weighed 123 pounds, 144 leaves weighed a fraction over 88 pounds. When the necessary deductions are made from their weight, something like anywhere from 50 to 75 pounds remain, and that, I believe, comes nearer the truth than any estimate made by unfriendly critics.

The plates were not heavier than that the Prophet, who was an unusually strong man, physically, as well as intellectually, could lift them and handle them. This is the testimony of eye witnesses. And that testimony stands.

But, is it certain that the Prophet Joseph had charge of the part of the plates that was sealed up? That may be the general impression, but is it correct? Orson Pratt says:

You recollect that when the Book of Mormon was translated from the plates, about two-thirds were sealed up, and Joseph was commanded not to break the seal; that part of the record was hid up.

If the words which I have italicized mean that the sealed part of the volume was hidden before the translation of the other part was even begun, then the Prophet did not have the sealed part in his keeping, and the objection based on the weight of the volume rests on nothing.

In 1927 Henry Miller wrote a translation of seven pages consisting of 2 Nephi 11:4–16:9 (Isaiah 2–6) in the paleo-Hebrew script used in Lehi’s day.
nished a product similar in appearance (see Lefmann, “Pre-Columbian Sur-
face Metallurgy”). In fact, author Betsy Hester and Gay Stresser-Pean,
“The Huastec Region: A Second Locus for the Pro-
duction of Bronze Alloys in Ancient Mesoamerica,” Science 237, 28 Aug-
ust 1992, 1215). Moreover, Nephi’s original plates might have been of different
composition than Mormon’s plates.

The Book of Mormon Plates
Jannie M. Sjodahl
Like the article itself, the following notes are
as they appeared in the original article from
the April 1923 Improvement Era, with the exception that publication
data has been added in brackets.
1. This is quoted from [Gregg Thomas,]
_The Passion of a Modern Master
_Arnold Friberg: The Mormon Artist,
(Philadelphia: University of Pennsyl-
vania Press/FARMS, 1999), p. 27.
2. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
_SMA Library.

Epigraphic Considerations on Jannie
Sjodahl’s Experiment with Nephi’s Writing
John Gee
1. Robert Deutsch, _Messages from the Past
Hebrew Ballas from the Time of Isaiah
Through the Destruction of the First
Temple_, Slavonic Inscription Collection
and an Up-to-Date Corpus (Tel Aviv:
Archaeological Center Publications,
1999).
2. “A New Weight from Hamath and
Trade Relations with the South in the
Ninth–Eighth Centuries a.D.,” in _The
World of the Ancient Levant_, ed. P. M.
Michaël Daviau, John W. Weyers, and
Michael Weigl [Sheffield: Sheffield

The Book of Mormon Art of Arnold Friberg,
“Painter of Scripture”
Vern Swanson
1. Vern Swanson, “A Master’s Hand: Arnold Friberg, Illustrator,” _Southwest
Art_ 31 (December 1981): 75.
2. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
Springville Museum of Art (SMA)
Library.
3. John L. Sorenson correspondence with
the author (21 May 1999), in the au-
thor’s possession. Two generations
later, Sorenson would issue a book,
_Images of Ancient America: Visualizing
Book of Mormon Life_ (Provo, Utah:
Research Project/FARMS, 1998), that pro-
vided some of the information Friberg
had hoped for in 1951.
4. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
_SMA Library.
5. Ted Schwarz, Arnold Friberg: _The
Passion of a Modern Master_ (Flagstaff,
Ariz.: Northland, 1985), 54. Schwarz
has a background in general historical
studio photography and magazine and
book illustration.
6. Margot J. Butler, Special Education Co-
oordinator, Church Education System,
Salt Lake Valley North Area, transcript of an interview with Friberg (3 June
1986). This and other quotes from the
transcript were modified by Friberg
himself upon reviewing this article in
manuscript form in February 2001.
7. Ibid.
9. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
_SMA Library.
10. Ibid.
12. Quoted in Grady Johnson, “Moses and
the Mormon Artist,” _JOURNAL OF
BOOK OF MORMON STUDIES

The Journey of an 1830 Book of Mormon
Gerard E. Jones
1. Journal of Samuel Smith, Historical
Department Archives, Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake
City.
2. I have obtained three other 1830 books
that closely match my 1830 Book of
Mormon and Bible not only in the type
of binding but also in the size and
placement of the lines of type on the
spines. I have not seen a study of book
binding (process, materials, suppliers
in America in that era. That study still
awaits the work of a serious student.
3. Journal of Orson Hyde, Historical De-
partment Archives, Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-day Saints.
4. The only other notations in the book are
by Merlin Wilbur. On the top of the
first blank page is his very legible
signature and beneath it, in two lines,
the words “Providence, R.I.” The other
notation is found at the top of page
574 (the title page for the book of
Mormon), where he wrote, again in two
lines, “Melvin Wilbur Book.”

The Book of Mormon as a Collectible
Matthew R. Sorensen and John L. Sorenson
1. This article was prepared using obser-
vations by Curt Bench (Benchmark
Bookco), Madelyn Garrett (University of
Utah Marriott Library Special Collec-
tions), Richard Horsey (Pioneer Books),
Joan Nay (Sam Weller’s Bookcases),
Ken Sanders (Ken Sanders Rare Books),
Kent Walgren (Scallywag’s Used and
Rare Books), and others who choose to
remain anonymous.

Other Ancient American Records Yet to
Come
Morney N. Nyman
1. In _A Guide to Publications on the Book
of Mormon: A Selected Annotated
Bibliography_ (Provo, Utah: FARMS,
1996), there is no mention of books or
articles about future records to come
forth as promised in the Book of
Mormon. Some time ago I published a
book with a chapter on the subject
(chapter 3 of _Two Sticks One in Thine
Hand_ [Salt Lake City: Gen-Dex Press,
1973], 139–50). Although this publica-
tion was included in the FARMS bibli-
ography, the subject of the above chap-
ter was lost annotated. Perhaps this
subject has been treated elsewhere,
but not to my knowledge, although ex-
cept from an unpublished manu-
script that briefly outlined some of
these records were printed in the RLDS
(Wisconsin. The witness [winter 1992].
2. See Henry J. Cadbury, “The New Testa-
ment and Early Christian Literature,”
_The Interpreter’s Bible, ed. George
Arthur Buttrick et al. Although I do not
agree with the conclusions of the article
cited here, it represents the thinking of
many Biblical scholars re-
garding the dating of 2 Peter and why
scholars reject the authorship of Peter’s
epistle. The claim that the epistles of
John were written after his gospel is
much more widely accepted and is
probably correct. The dating of John’s
epistles also confirmed in the article-
cited above.
3. The brother of Jared was one of those
who had written his vision of the end of
the world. The vision was recorded
in the sealed portion of the plates given
to Joseph Smith. These will be dis-
cussed later.
4. Brigham Young, in _Journal of Dis-
courses, 19:38. The incident is quoted
as evidence of the existence of plates
and not as a discussion of Book of
Mormon geography. Whether the cave
was in New York or was a vision given
to Joseph and Oliver is irrelevant to the
discussion here.
5. The preceding references are to quota-
tions that were obviously taken from
the plates of brass and included in the
writings of Nephi or Mormon’s abridgment.
6. See _Teachings of the Prophet Joseph
7. The subheadings of the Book of
Mormon books were part of the text writ-
ten by Mormon and translated by
Joseph Smith, while the synopses of
chapters were written by various modern-day apostles as new editions
were printed. For examples of the sub-
headings written by Mormon, see the
major subheading under the titles of
Alma, Helaman, 3 Nephi, and 4 Nephi;
and for examples of subheadings
within various books, see the italicized
comments preceding Mosiah 9, 23;
Alma 5, 9, 17, 21, 36, 38, 39, 43;
Helaman 7, 13, and 3 Nephi 11.

8. Jesus also taught more in Jerusalem
than is recorded in the New Testament.
As John wrote his history, he declared,
“And there are also many other things
which Jesus did, which the world should be
written, even John believet that the
world could not contain the books that should be writ-
ten” (John 21:25).

9. Mostori told Joseph Smith that the ful-
ess of the gospel was found in the
Book of Mormon plates (Joseph
Smith—History 1:34). The Doctrine
and Covenants repeatedly states that
the Book of Mormon contained the
fulness of the gospel (see D&C 1:22–23;
14:10; 20:9; 27:5, 35:12, 17, 39:61;
42:12; 45:28, 66:2). For a definition of
the fulness of the gospel given within
the Book of Mormon, see 3 Nephi
27:13–21.
10. Some consider 2 Nephi 27 to be partly
from the text of Isaiah 29 with Nephi’s comments interposed. Because Isaiah
29 in the Joseph Smith Translation
contains almost the exact wording of
2 Nephi 27, I accept the whole chapter
of 2 Nephi 27 as the original text of
Isaiah except for the introductory verse
and a slight paraphrasing of verses
1–2 and 3. 2 Nephi 28 also implies that
Nephi had concluded his quoting of
Isaiah and was now adding his com-
ments.
11. See Sidney T. Sparrey, _Doctrine and
Covenants Companion_ (Salt Lake City:
Bookcraft, 1960), 305. Isaiah speaks of
how “in that day shall the Lord of hosts be
for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of
beauty, and for the forehead of his people” (Isaiah 2:8,5). The context of
that chapter is Ephraim, or northern
Israel, in the day of its wickedness prior to being taken into captivity by
Assyria in 721 B.C. Typical of Old
Testament prophecy, a message of doom (captivity) is followed by a mes-
sage of hope referring to the restora-
tion of the latter days as “in that day.”
The residue is probably the remnant of
the tribes of the north that would
some day return (see Isaiah 6:13,7,3) (the
name Shaar-jashub means “a remnant
shall return”).
12. The “crown of glory” suggests the tem-
ple endowment and sealings in other
scriptural passages. Enos was com-
missioned to ascend Mount Seion,
where he was “clothed upon glory” (see
Moses 7:2–3). President Joseph Fielding Smith believed that Peter,
James, and John received their endowments on the Mount of
Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1–9)
when they were given the keys of
the kingdom (see his _Doctrines of Sava-
The Lord has often used the mountain for
his holy place when there were no tem-
ple available (as he did with Moses in
Exodus 24:12–13:18 and with Elijah in 1
Kings 19). While we have no direct
scriptural statement that the “rich
treasures” mentioned in D&C 88 are
genealogical records, the above scrip-
tures suggest that such records will constitute at least part of the page:
One of the most significant purposes
of the latter-day restoration is the