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, unless, 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 number, and bound together like the leaves of a book by massive rings passed through the back edges.¹

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 volume 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 entire 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 40⅔ 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 complete a sentence as we do. And frequently the auxiliary words consisted of only one letter, which was attached to the main word, either as a prefix or suffix. Finally, 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 actually needed, there is ample enough margin to allow for large, readable characters, and the necessary thickness 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 informed, 21½ pennyweights. That would make a total, if my figures are correct, of 123 pounds avoirdupois.

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; Mormon 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.


¹ Heber C. Kimball’s estimate was about six by nine and one-fourth inches, and that the volume was about four inches high, each plate being as thick as thick tin.

² This was a work written by Edward L. Pitcher.

³ Or as many as 40¾ pages, if Hebrew characters were of the same size as the American types.
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 Lechman, “Pre-Columbian Sur-
face Metallurgy”); see also Holly Sheriff and Gay Stresser-Pean, “The Huastec
Puzzle of an Ancient Master” (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland, 1985). Several
scholars have a background in general historical
photography and magazine and book illustration.
8. Margot J. Butler, Special Education Co-
ordinator, Church Education System, Salt
Lake City North Area, transcript of an interview with Friberg (3 June
1996). This and other quotes from the transcript were modified by Friberg
himself upon reviewing this article in manuscript form in February 2001.
9. Ibid.
11. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001), SMA Library.
12. Ibid.
13. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001), SMA Library.
14. All the comments are from Butler’s
1986 interview, modified by Friberg in
15.Friberg statement to Vern Swanson,
December 2000.
16. See Noel A. Carmack, “Images of Christ
40–47.
17. I have published a book on the
occasion of a show of Friberg’s work.
The Journey of an 1830 Book of Mormon
Gerald E. Jones
1. Journal of Samuel Smith, Historical
Department Archives, Church of Jesus
Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake
City, 1842–1843.
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 Melvin Wilbur. On the top of the
first blank page is this 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.”
5. The Book of Mormon as a Collectible
Matthew R. Sorenson and John L. Sorenson
6. This article was prepared using obser-
vations by Curt Bench (Benchmark
Books), Madelyn Garrett (University of
Utah Marriott Library Special Collec-
tions), Richard Horley (Pioneer Books),
Joun Nay (Sam Weller’s Bookstore),
Ken Sanders (Ken Sanders Rare Books),
Kent Walgren (Scallywag’s Used and
Rare Books), and others who chose to
remain anonymous.

Other Ancient American Records Yet to
Come Forth
Monte S. 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
(3rd edition of Two Sticks One in Thine
Hand [Salt Lake City: Gen-Des Press,
(1997), 139–50]. Although this publica-
tion was included in the FARMS bibli-
ography, the subject of the above chap-
ter was not 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
2. See Henry J. Cadbury, “The
1930 Text 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 Bible 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
for the introductory verse
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 in Mormon’s
seerings.
6. See Teachings of the Prophet Joseph
Smith, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith
(Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976),
207.
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 book, he declared,
“And there are also many other things
which Jesus did, the which, if they
should be written every one, I suppose
that even the world itself could not
contain the books that should be writ-
ten” (John 21:25).
9. Moroni told Joseph Smith that the ful-
ness 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 interspersed. 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
2, 5, 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 B. Sperry, Doctrine and
Covenants Compendium (Salt Lake City:
Bookcraft, 1968), 305. In the Book of
Mormon, Lehi tells his son that the Lord
had bestowed upon him the honor of
being the first born in the kingdom of
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-
29:5). The context of that chapter is Ephraim, or northern
Israel, in the day of its wickedness;
From the text of Isaiah 29 with Nephi’s
comments interspersed. Because Isaiah