Epigraphic Considerations on Janne Sjodahl's Experiment with Nephite Writing

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Having studied Janne Sjodahl’s work on the number of plates required for the original Book of Mormon text, John Gee examines the potential drawbacks of Sjodahl’s experiment. He concludes that the size of Miller’s script suffices for Sjodahl’s test.
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Two issues arise from the Hebrew characters that Henry Miller drew for Janne Sjodahl’s experiment on Nephite writing. A minor issue is that Miller used the later, square Hebrew letters rather than the archaic Hebrew letters of Lehi’s day. The type of characters used made a difference in the space required to record the sample text. A major issue, however, is the size of the characters used, which made an even greater difference in the space required for the sample text. To modern readers, the characters that Miller used look too small to be readily legible. Would ancient scribes have used such minuscule letters?

A casual look at Hebrew papyrus manuscripts (most of which date to after the Babylonian exile) shows that the letters were written much larger than those that Miller rendered. Papyrus documents were written with brush and ink and can exhibit elegant calligraphy. But the plates of gold and brass were engraved, and engraving involved different conventions than did brush and ink writing.

We now have enough actual examples of ancient Hebrew writing on artifacts to examine the issue of engraved Hebrew characters from Lehi’s day. Published drawings or photographs of the writing on such objects are typically enlarged to two or three times the actual size in order to make the characters more legible. I have measured the actual size of the letters on a series of engraved objects based on their documented size. The characters used anciently are about the same size as those that Sjodahl’s scribe used. Contrary to our notions of legibility, Miller’s Hebrew script serves adequately for the test for which Sjodahl used it.

The writing sample I have used in the accompanying chart is taken from two recent publications (others could have been used without changing the result) that illustrate ancient seals, bullae, and weights on which Hebrew characters are engraved. Seven objects come from the Moussaieff collection, as shown in a book by Robert Deutsch. Other letters appear on a stone weight (the “Kollek weight”) discussed in an article by Michael Heltzer. The objects were selected to cover the entire alphabet. All the writing comes from the three centuries immediately preceding Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem.

The letters in Sjodahl’s 1927 article average about 1.5 mm square. The table below shows the sizes in millimeters of the characters on the antique objects. (The table substitutes later Hebrew equivalents, which some readers will know, rather than the archaic characters.) The letters vary in size from object to object but are all roughly in the 1–3 mm-square range. The epigraphic realities of the size of the characters shed new light on Jacob’s remark about “the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates” (Jacob 4:1) and on Moroni’s lament that “we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands” (Ether 12:24).
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Region: A Second Focus for the Pro-
duction of Bronze Alloys in Ancient Mesoamerica,” Science 257, 28 August
1992, 1215). Moreover, Nephi’s original plates might have been of different
composition than Mormon’s plates.

The Book of Mormon Plates
Janne M. Sjodahl

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26. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001),
27. Rare Books, and others who choose to remain anonymous.

Other Ancient American Records Yet to Come Forth
Monte S. Nyman

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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 verse 3. And 3.2 Nephi 28 also implies that Nephi had concluded his quoting of Isaiah and was now adding his com-
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The Book of Mormon as a Collectible
Matthew R. Sorenson and John L. Sorenson

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