A Seemingly Strange Story Illuminated

Kevin L. Barney
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Author(s)  Kevin L. Barney


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On 2 September 1829, Abner Cole, working under the pseudonym "Obediah Dogberry," began publishing a weekly newspaper in Palmyra called The Reflector. In that paper he printed sarcastic comments about the Book of Mormon before its publication and before he had even seen it. In the 29 December 1829 issue, Cole began to publish serially a pirated copy of the text of the Book of Mormon in violation of Joseph Smith's copyright, thus forcing Joseph to make a special trip to Palmyra from Harmony, Pennsylvania, in order to compel Cole to cease and desist. Following the 22 January 1830 issue, Cole did stop publishing the Book of Mormon text itself, but he continued to publish his caustic commentary, including a parody he called the "Book of Pukei," which appeared in June and July of that year.1

In the 6 January 1830 issue, Cole responded to a communication from someone styling himself "Plain Truth" with a series of six weekly articles, each under the title "Gold Bible." Cole, who did much


to popularize the sobriquet "Gold Bible," explained the origin of the
term in the 11 January 1830 issue of The Reflector:

We inadvertently neglected in our remarks last week, re-
specting this wonderful work, to accompany them with the
explanation requisite to a correct understanding of it. The
appellation of "Gold Bible" is only cant cognomen that has
been given it by the unbelievers—for be it known that this
Book, as well as the sacred volume which is held so valuable
by all good Christians, is not without its revilers and unbel-
ievers—by way of derision.²

In the 27 February 1830 issue, Cole tosses out the following off-
hand insult:

Diabolical. Our readers must be aware of the great diffi-
culty we labor under in translating our foreign correspon-
dence. The inspired man who wrote the "Gold Bible" on
"plates of brass" in the "reformed Egyptian" language, on ac-
count of its brevity, as we are informed, through the medium
of one of these pseudo-prophets, never had half the trouble
that we experience in deciphering the unseemly scrolls of
this dark representative of old Pluto's domain.³

These quotes from Cole illustrate the beginnings of what would be-
come a longstanding pattern in anti-Mormon literature of rejecting
even the barest possibility that the Book of Mormon could be what it
claims, because those claims involve the seemingly ridiculous notion
of ancient writing on metal (and gold at that!). The prospect of writ-
ing on metal plates was so foreign to modern culture that a flippant,
dismissive wave of the hand was felt to be all that was needed to re-
ject the Book of Mormon as having any basis in reality.

John A. Tvedtnes’s recent book, The Book of Mormon and Other
Hidden Books, is the latest addition to a significant corpus of Mor-

². As quoted in Francis W. Kirkham, A New Witness for Christ in America (Inde-
pendence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1942), 271.
³. Ibid., 438.
mon literature responsive to this superficial critical perspective. In his acknowledgments (see pp. ii–iii), Tvedtøes mentions many of the church leaders and scholars who, from an LDS perspective, pio-
neered studies of ancient writing on metallic plates, including Orson Pratt, Franklin S. Harris Jr.,4 Ariel L. Crowley,5 Hugh W. Nibley,6 Paul R. Cheesman,7 Mark E. Petersen,8 and Thomas Stuart Ferguson.9 I was glad to see that the introduction to this volume was written by H. Curtis Wright, whose background in library science brought a much-needed bibliographical sophistication to the field, something previously lacking in some of the early pioneering efforts.10 In his notes, Tvedtøes also mentions the work of contemporary LDS scholars, such as C. Wilfred Griggs,11 William J. Hamblin,12 John W.

5. See Ariel L. Crowley, About the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1961).
6. In numerous writings Tvedtøes cites throughout his notes.
8. See Mark E. Petersen, Those Gold Plates! (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979).
Welch, and William J. Adams Jr. Tvedtnes points out that Gordon B. Hinckley, as a young missionary, wrote an article for the Improvement Era in which he discussed the existence of inscribed metal plates from the ancient Near East in the British Museum (see p. ii).

Given the extensive literature on the subject, as I began to read this book I wondered whether we needed yet more material. I wondered whether this book might be beating a dead horse. I soon came to realize that the proverbial horse is very much alive and could still use a good beating. Wright addresses this very issue in his introduction. He describes a situation involving the parents of two daughters, one a Mormon in Illinois and the other a Baptist in Missouri. Their Mormon daughter taught them the gospel from the Book of Mormon, and they were receptive to it until they moved to Missouri, where their Baptist daughter began to attack what they had been taught by her Mormon sister. A prominent part of this attack was the claim that no one in antiquity had ever written anything on metal of

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15. I wanted to read the Hinckley article, but Tvedtnes did not give a citation for it. The point is perhaps moot for me, however, because living in Illinois, I have great difficulty getting my hands on material from the Improvement Era (in fact, my local library was unable to fill my last interlibrary loan request). Elsewhere, Tvedtnes has described how when he wrote his “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Survey,” BYU Studies 6/1 (1970): 50–60, he did not know about prior work along these lines, such as Thomas W. Brookbank, “Hebrew Idioms and Analogies in the Book of Mormon,” Improvement Era 13 (1909–10): 117–21, 234–39, 336–42, 418–20, 538–43; 17 (1914): 189–92; and E. Craig Bramwell, “Hebrew Idioms in the Small Plates of Nephi,” Improvement Era (July 1961): 496–97, 517. See John A. Tvedtnes in FARMS Review of Books 6/1 (1994): 34 n. 39. In the volume under review, Tvedtnes also reminds us that the first English translation of the Apocalypse of Abraham appeared in the pages of the Improvement Era in 1898 (see p. 170). I applaud the fact that the church has made the Ensign available on its Web site; my hope is that at some point the gems hidden among decades of the Era might also be made more broadly available in electronic format.
any kind. Although it seems remarkable to me that someone would make such an assertion, upon reflection I can see how such a notion could arise, for two reasons. First, it would be very difficult either to support or to exclude this proposition using nothing more than an Internet search, as the father in the story attempted to do. Second, anti-Mormon literature tends to ignore current LDS scholarship and relies instead on dated, anti-Mormon sources, many of which did make such claims.16

If I had any lingering doubt about the need for continued work in this field, it was dispelled by an article I recently saw on the Internet, written by Thomas J. Finley, critiquing Hugh Nibley’s essay that compares the Lachish Letters to the Book of Mormon.17 In this piece, Finley tries to take advantage of the fact that Nibley’s essay, originally published in 1982, is somewhat dated, having relied on the editio princeps of the Lachish Letters published in 1938 by Harry Torczyner.18 In 1935, eighteen ostraca (pottery fragments) with inscriptions in ancient Hebrew were discovered at the site of the ancient fortress city of Lachish, and three additional ostraca were discovered in 1938. These letters date to about 590 B.C. (i.e., within a decade of the time Lehi and his family left Jerusalem and roughly contemporary with Jeremiah).

16. As an illustration, Wright (see p. xii) points to continued uncritical reliance on Baptist lectures against Mormonism delivered in Salt Lake City in 1885. See Martin T. Lamb, The Golden Bible; or, the Book of Mormon: Is It From God? (New York: Ward and Drummond, 1886).


Ostracon IV begins as follows:

May Yahweh bring my lord this very day good tidings! And now, in accordance with all that my lord hath written, so hath thy servant done. I have written on the door [deleth] in accordance with all that [my lord] hath directed me. 19

The meaning of the word deleth in the third line of the ostracon, translated neutrally here as “door,” is somewhat uncertain in this context. Most scholars have interpreted the word in light of Jeremiah 36:23:

And it came to pass, that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves [delathoth, plural of deleth], he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll [megillah] was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth.

Although the basic meaning of Hebrew deleth is “door,” in this passage the word is generally understood to refer to columns of a scroll, apparently from a similarity of appearance between columns and doors. In fact, English column derives from Latin columna, based on a similarity of appearance between a column of text and a pillar.

Finley quotes Nibley as remarking (following Torczyner) that since potsherds “do not lend themselves to convenient filing, . . . the contents of important Lachish Letters were duly abridged for transfer to the official archives . . . in the form of delathoth.” 20 Finley subsequently reports that, according to Nibley’s reading of Torczyner, the term deleth originally meant a “doorboard” and then developed the meanings of a “board, plaque, plate, or tablet.” Citing Nibley further,

“Torczyner finds the root meaning of the Accadic word edeln from wdl, ydl, ‘to lock or shut,’ the collective noun indicating things locked, hinged or joined together—a reminder that the very ancient codex form of the book was joined pages of wood, ivory or metal.” From this Nibley concludes, “The scanty

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evidence, confined to the time of Jeremiah, is enough to justify speculation of the possibility of the delathoth being such ‘plates’ or metal tablets as turn up in the Book of Mormon story.”

Finley would like to be able to follow Torczyner in taking deleth in Ostracon IV.3 merely as a sheet of papyrus or parchment, precisely as the term is used in Jeremiah 36:23. But the scholarly literature forces him to acknowledge the view of many scholars, based on Ugaritic and Phoenician parallels, that deleth here may refer to some sort of writing tablet. Finley does not seem to fully appreciate that the conclusion of the scholarship he cites is the very basis of Nibley’s conjecture. He concludes this part of his argument, “It is unlikely that the wax notebooks used by the ancient scribes ever amounted to anything like an ‘ancient codex form’ with ‘joined pages of wood, ivory, or metal.’” Here, though, he simply displays his ignorance of the construction of ancient wooden writing tablets. Such tablets were indeed joined together by leather or metal hinges (and in fact were put together very much like doors). The outer edge of the boards was raised so that the wax writing surface on the face of the boards would not be affected when the leaves were brought together into the closed position (precisely the way one would close a modern book along its

21. Ibid.

22. In my view, Finley is correct (contra Nibley’s tentative suggestion) that a scroll is involved in the Jeremiah text. Three or four columns were cut from the scroll at a time, which then burned in the fire; this does not suggest anything other than a papyrus or parchment roll (notwithstanding Nibley’s focus on the use of a knife to do the cutting). Conversely, I believe that Nibley (contra Finley’s preference) is correct that deleth in Lachish Letter IV.3 most likely refers to some sort of writing tablet. Note in this case that the writing was “on the deleth” (‘al ha-deleth), which does not work if deleth means “column” here. There would be no reason to call a roll of papyrus or parchment itself a deleth; the word only works in that context if it is a reference to one or more columns. Finley cites A. Baumann as taking deleth as “columns of a scroll” for Jeremiah but a “slate” or “board covered with writing” for the Lachish Letter; I agree with the distinction in usage Baumann draws here.

23. In addition to the sources noted by Finley, note also that Semitic deleth comes into Greek as deltos, “writing tablet.” The triangular capital letter delta was in the shape of a certain type of ancient writing tablet.
spine). And while it is true that most such writing tablets were made of wood, they could also be made of ivory or metal, as Nibley indicates. I would freely concede that Nibley’s argument is based on “scant evidence” and is a “speculation,” as he himself stated. Nevertheless, Nibley’s argument remains a distinct possibility, and Finley’s failure to fully grasp Nibley’s argument seems to have been based on his own fundamental ignorance of ancient writing tablets.

Finley next quotes Ernst Wurthwein to the effect that the Copper Scroll represents a “special exception” in using metal as an ancient writing surface (though not for a biblical text). This part of the paper is simply embarrassing because it is obvious that the Copper Scroll is the sole example of ancient writing on metal of which Finley has any knowledge. Finley devotes a paragraph to establishing that the Copper Scroll dates not to the time of the “alleged” Nephi but to the first cen-

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24 For a basic explanation of the construction of wooden writing boards, see Keith Meservy, “Ezekiel’s ‘Sticks,’” Ensign (September 1977): 22–27, and “Ezekiel’s Sticks and the Gathering of Israel,” Ensign (February 1987): 4–13. Brian E. Keck, “Ezekiel 37, Sticks, and Babylonian Writing Boards: A Critical Reappraisal,” Dialogue 23/1 (1990): 126–38, rejects both (1) the Septuagint tradition that translates the Hebrew word ‘ēts in Ezekiel 37 with Greek ῥάβδος (“rod”), as well as (2) the targumim, which translate that word with Aramaic לוח (“tablet, writing board”). Keck would take ‘ēts in that passage as literally referring to a “stick” one would pick up off the ground, seeing this as a highly symbolic action. While I would agree with Keck’s rejection of Meservy’s Akkadian linguistic argument, I nevertheless would follow the targumic tradition as a much more meaningful symbol of the reunification of the divided kingdoms (i.e., the folding together of the leaves of a wooden writing board). This would enable the two sticks actually to become “one stick” [ל‘עֵצִים וְכֵלָּד] in Ezekiel’s hand in the presence of the people. No similarly symbolic effect would be possible with two twigs.

25 Finley writes, “My understanding is that the ‘notebooks’ to which he refers were covered with wax.” While this is a correct statement, it is hardly controversial, so his qualification with the words “my understanding” appears to reflect some uncertainty on his part as to how these tablets worked and were assembled. Finley quotes Baumann, who described “the common folded double boards” as being “very similar in appearance to a double door.” Finley was apparently unable to conceptualize what Baumann was describing, which was no doubt the basis for Nibley’s allusion to the “ancient codex form.”


27 Finley neglects to correct Wurthwein’s error and places the Copper Scroll in Qumran Cave 1. The reality, as indicated by its siglum (3Q15), is that the Copper Scroll was recovered from Cave 3.
tury A.D. (as if any Latter-day Saint author had ever suggested otherwise). 28 He allows that “certainly we cannot say metal writing material in antiquity was impossible, since the Copper Scroll does at least offer a broad analogy” (thereby confirming that he knows of no other example). He nevertheless stresses the gap in time, the different genres, and the fact that the Book of Mormon plates would have to have been more extensive than the Copper Scroll. He also emphasizes the scroll form of the Copper Scroll rather than its being “plates,” apparently unaware that “Copper Scroll” is really a misnomer. Although the copper text was discovered in a rolled condition (and since the rest of the discoveries were parchment or papyrus “scrolls,” it was natural to call this the “Copper Scroll”), in contrast to the parchment or papyrus Dead Sea Scrolls, it certainly was not intended to be regularly rolled and unrolled. Therefore, a more apt title would be the “Copper Plaque” or the “Copper Plate,” reflecting the fact that under normal circumstances it was intended to lie flat. 29 In any event, the differences between the Copper Scroll and the Book of Mormon plates are certainly relevant, and they do establish that the Copper Scroll is not a precise example of the form of plates involved in the production of the Book of Mormon. Yet I am unaware of any informed Latter-day Saint who has ever made such a claim. The Copper Scroll, even by itself, is sufficient to demonstrate that important archival records associated with the temple were written on metal, at least in the Roman period. 30 But the Copper Scroll need not stand alone as a

28. Finley seems to be unaware of the controversy over whether the Copper Scroll predates or postdates A.D. 70, and the significance of the answer to that question for determining just what the Copper Scroll represents. See P. Kyle McCarter Jr., “The Mystery of the Copper Scroll,” in Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls, ed. Hershel Shanks (New York: Vintage, 1992), 227–41. McCarter also addresses the genizah concept mentioned below.


30. Even if the Copper Scroll were an ancient fantasy, it presumably would have been fashioned after the form of authentic temple records. Otherwise, it is difficult to imagine why someone would have bothered going to the difficulty of engraving the text on metal. Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 5, note that “copper and bronze were common media of choice for the archival records of temples in the Roman period.”
witness; despite Finley's ignorance, we now know of thousands of documents from antiquity that were written on metal.

My point in pursuing this brief review of the first part of Finley's paper is that if Finley—who holds a Ph.D. from a prestigious university, is a professor at a theology school, and writes with at least a veneer of scholarship—is so ill informed on the subject of ancient writing on metallic plates, how much more likely is it that the average lay person has not even the first clue as to the nature of this ancient practice? Accordingly, I repent of any thought I ever had that further studies along these lines might be superfluous and unnecessary. Clearly we need more widely disseminated information concerning ancient writing on metal plates, preferably presented in a form accessible to nonspecialists. The new book by John Tvedtnes fills this need.

The Tvedtnes volume would be a welcome addition to the literature even if it did nothing more than add new examples of ancient writing on metal plates to our existing catalog. But in fact, while it does do this, it also does much more. The virtue of this well-conceived study is its breadth. Instead of focusing narrowly on ancient writing on metal plates or burials in stone boxes, as previous studies have done, this book approaches the story of the Book of Mormon plates from a variety of angles, many of which have not received this kind of substantive attention in the past. These angles include:

- The basic concept of hidden records
- The notion of records hidden specifically for the purpose of coming forth in future generations
- Hiding records in boxes
- Sealed books
- Angels as guardians of hidden books
- Hiding sacred relics
- Mountain repositories of records

31. Tvedtnes discloses that Wright is currently preparing an exhaustive bibliography of writings on metal plates (see p. 154). The bibliography has reached at least fifty-four pages and documents the existence of literally thousands of metal documents all over the ancient world (see p. x).
• Long-term preservation of records
• The concept of books in the “treasury”

In turn, Tvedtnes divides each of these broad inquiries into perhaps a half-dozen categories of evidence, derived from an extensive recitation of ancient and medieval sources. Thus, Tvedtnes “shows perhaps fifty things about ancient records that must have been hilarious in 1830 but make perfect sense today” (p. xi).

The book itself is well designed. In recent years, FARMS has moved away from the horizontal-striped cover style that was characteristic of volumes published by the BYU Religious Studies Center. That style was innovative and fresh for its time but now seems dated and reminds me of 1970s-vintage avocado green kitchen appliances. The exterior and interior graphic design of the book is state of the art, as has been the case with other recent titles issued from FARMS. The paperback format and inexpensive price make the book easily accessible to the LDS book-buying public.

This volume was also well edited. Although I was on the lookout for errors, I noticed very few. On page 114 the Syriac Book of the Bee is described as a tenth-century text, whereas the bibliography places it in the early thirteenth century (see p. 232). Also, the first listing in the bibliography is of Livy’s magnum opus Ab Urbe Condita. This Latin title means “From the Founding of the City” rather than “From the Hidden City,” as the bibliography takes it. Also, the statement that no English translation is available is incorrect. Of the original 142 books, only 35 (Books 1–10 and 21–45) survive, together with some fragments and summaries of the missing material; nevertheless, that which is extant is all available in English (for instance, in the Loeb Classical Library).32

32. I only noted a few additional infelicities: (1) The lack of footnotes for the last two paragraphs on p. 47 seems to be an oversight. (2) On p. 48 Tvedtnes states that about half of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in Cave 4. Since something over 550 of the scroll texts derive from that cave, substantially more than half come from Cave 4, whether we use the older estimate of 800 texts Tvedtnes gives or more recent estimates of around 880. Since the total number of Dead Sea Scroll texts keeps rising as scholars identify the texts more precisely, this is not an error so much as a bit of obsolescence in the data. (3) On p. 113
Although Tvedtnes gives proper attention to relevant secondary literature, for the most part he relies on primary sources, generally a mark of good scholarship. The wealth of insights he has culled from these sources is truly impressive and makes for an interesting read. In order to aid the reader, Tvedtnes has supplied a near exhaustive bibliography of the ancient and medieval sources cited in the book. This resource extends for some twenty-four pages and covers at least 120 texts. Each entry gives necessary background information and points the reader to an English translation, where available. Just reading the bibliography itself was fun and something of an education for me. My only complaint about the bibliography is that a number of works referenced in the book did not appear in the bibliography.33

The sources Tvedtnes uses are wide-ranging. Geographically, although most derive from the Near East, a few come from as far away as China. Temporally, only a handful date to around the time of Lehi and Nephi. Some predate that time, but perhaps a majority substantially postdates that time, deriving largely from intertestamental, early Christian, and rabbinic literature. Given the variations in time and, to a lesser extent, in place, from the origins of the Book of Mormon, it should be clear that this evidence does not somehow prove that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text written on metal plates. Such a demonstration would not be possible with exist-

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33. For the most part, italicized titles in the text were included in the bibliography, but I noted the following exceptions: Asclepius (p. 17), The Key (p. 18), The Wing (p. 18), Moreh Nebukim (p. 21), Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles (p. 81), The Angelic Keys (p. 98), Mystery of Mysteries and the Holy of Holies (p. 98), On the Gospel according to St. John (p. 114), The Book of the Invisible Great Spirit (p. 128), Apocalypse of Enoch (p. 128), Pseudo-Dionysius (p. 135), and Phaedra (p. 162). Some of these titles are lost books, and it may be that those were not intended to be included in the bibliography; if so, a note to that effect would have been helpful. I would have preferred the bibliography to be truly exhaustive and, in the case of lost books, to simply include what we know of them. I also observed that the entry for “Talmud” only mentions the Babylonian Talmud. Most readers likely would not know that the abbreviation “TY” used on p. 160 refers to the Jerusalem Talmud.
ing evidence. The aim of this book is more modest: it is to show that, contrary to the long-standing caricature suggested by anti-Mormon sources, the story of the Book of Mormon plates is “neither unique nor strange” (p. 188) in the ancient world generally. The evidence amassed by Tvedtnes certainly demonstrates the plausibility of Joseph Smith’s account of the origins of the record.

Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars often used rabbinic sources to elucidate the Semitic background to the New Testament, despite the fact that those sources postdated the New Testament by centuries. The rabbinic sources were simply the best available evidence at the time. They were not a perfect source of information, but what else could one do? Now that the Dead Sea Scrolls are available, they provide an important control on the application to the New Testament of insights gleaned from rabbinic literature as well as a direct source for such insights themselves. Although Tvedtnes’s sources are not perfect for the task of illuminating the origins of the Book of Mormon, much like the rabbinic sources used to elucidate the New Testament prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, they do provide the best currently available information. Perhaps someday someone will discover an extensive temple archive dating to the end of the seventh century B.C. in Jerusalem that will provide more direct evidence for the way records were kept in that time and place. Until that day comes, Tvedtnes’s study is the next best thing.

Since the publication of Tvedtnes’s book, some discussion of it has appeared on the Internet. If the book should go into a second edition, two issues raised by this discussion would be worth addressing. First, it would be helpful to have some more specific analysis of the extent to which parallels adduced in the book might be connected to Book of Mormon culture—by diffusion or otherwise—or rather are to be explained by polygenesis (that is, independent development from more than one source). 34 Tvedtnes has commented

34. This point was raised by Brant Gardner in a brief review posted on Scripture-L on 11 January 2001. The post is available at the list archives, which may be found at www.topica.com/lists/scripture-l/read?sort=d&start=1562 under “Other Hidden Books (mini-review).”
that he did not actually search for the parallels set forth in the book; rather, he came across them serendipitously over time while pursuing other research and wanted to make the information available to others.\textsuperscript{35} Although an analysis of the type suggested was not part of the book Tvedtnes set out to write, I would certainly be interested in his comments on this subject.

Second, while the purpose of the book was to describe numerous ancient and medieval parallels to certain unusual aspects of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, it would also be worth addressing the question of whether Joseph Smith could have derived these unusual characteristics from ideas current in his nineteenth-century upstate New York culture. Historically the larger and more persistent criticism has been that no (or few) ancient parallels to the Book of Mormon account exist—a criticism Tvedtnes's book demolishes. More recently, however, it has been claimed that Joseph could have derived these ideas (books inscribed on metal plates buried in stone boxes, and so forth) from stories that were then current in his environment. Like Tvedtnes, my initial reaction to these arguments was that the Book of Mormon elicited such universal shock and disbelief from so many quarters when it came forth that it was unlikely that these ideas were circulating at the time and place of the book's publication. It is possible, however, that these concepts were known in some small subset or subsets of the culture. It would be useful to devote some space in a future edition to a consideration of the sources that have been put forward as containing such nineteenth-century parallels.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35} Tvedtnes's explanation can be found in a post forwarded to Scripture-L on 12 January 2001. Further discussion of this and the following point may be found on a message board called Zion's Lighthouse at pub26.ezboard.com/ipacumenispagesfrm16 .show MessageRange?topicID=48,topic&start=1&stop=20.

\textsuperscript{36} The argument for a nineteenth-century environmental source for inscribed, buried metal plates is made in Dan Vogel, \textit{Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon} (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 18–19, and Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon History," \textit{Dialogue} 26/3 (1993): 157. At least four possible nineteenth-century sources that conceivably could have influenced Joseph Smith have been put forward:
A good illustration of the type of evidence Tvedtnes offers in this volume is from the *Apocalypse of Paul*. According to the bibliography (see p. 229), this is a document attributed to the apostle Paul, describing his vision of the heavens that he alluded to in 2 Corinthians 12:1–4, and it existed early enough to have been known by Augustine (fourth century A.D.). The preface to one version of the account reads as follows:

In the consulate of Theodosius Augustus the Younger and of Cynegius a certain respected man was living in Tarsus in the house which had once belonged to St. Paul; an angel, appearing to him by night, gave him a revelation telling him to break up the foundations of the house and to make public

A. Solomon Spaulding’s fictional account of finding twenty-eight parchment rolls written in Latin in a small cave, their having been deposited there by Roman soldiers from the age of Constantine. See Kent P. Jackson, ed., *Manuscript Found: The Complete Original “Spaulding Manuscript”* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1996). To learn why the Spaulding theory of Book of Mormon origins is considered bankrupt by the vast majority of Book of Mormon scholars (including even the more responsible critics), see the introductory essay by Rex C. Reeve Jr. (ibid., vii–xxxii) and the literature cited there.


C. A story related by an Indian about copper and brass plates with writing on them that were buried with certain men, as recounted in James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1775), 179.


Pending further discussion of the matter, I refer the reader to William J. Hamblin, “An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe’s Assumptions and Methodologies,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 434–523, for a response to these claims. In fact, while researching materials for the present review, I came upon the following statement by Metcalfe: “Based on Josephus and Pliny, Jahn speculated that ancient Hebrews went so far as to write their sacred books in gold.” See Metcalfe, “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions,” 157. I was therefore bemused when I then saw the Jahn passage quoted in full context in Hamblin, “An Apologist for the Critics,” 468, which makes it clear that Jahn was talking about writing in gold ink, not writing on plates of gold metal.
what he found. But he thought this was a delusion. However, the angel came the third time and scourged him and compelled him to break up the foundations. And when he had dug he discovered a marble box which was inscribed on the sides; in it was the revelation of St. Paul and the shoes 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; 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. 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. (pp. 185–86)

The correlations between this account and that of Joseph Smith are sufficiently obvious that they were noted by non-LDS scholar Willis Barnstone, who wrote of the Apocalypse: “The details of the discovered scriptures call to mind the detailed evidence associated with the discovery of Mormon scriptures in New York state.” Tvedtnes discusses this text both in connection with records hidden in stone boxes (see p. 39) and in connection with the angelic administration of records (see pp. 99–100). Appendix I contains an extended treatment of this particular text based on a brown-bag lecture given by Steven W. Booras of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (CPART). Booras notes several details in this account that 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. (pp. 186–87)

37. Willis Barnstone, ed., The Other Bible (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 537.
Booras also points out some obvious differences between the 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.
- Although relics were found in both boxes, they were considerably different.
- It is not clear on what medium the *Apocalypse of Paul* was written. (p. 187)

Although this is a particularly dramatic example, parallels of this type are multiplied a hundredfold in Tvedtnes's book.38

With that basic overview of the book in place, at this point I will mention some of the things I found particularly interesting. Rabbi Abraham Eleazar, in his 1735 alchemical work, wrote that at the time the temple was destroyed, in a.d. 70, the secret books of the Jews were written on copper tablets and concealed at the entrance to the holy of holies, beneath a stone two cubits in depth that was marked with the Hebrew word for “fire” (see pp. 18–19). The rabbi copied this material from copper onto tree bark. As Tvedtnes observes, the eminent twentieth-century Jewish scholar Raphael Patai, in retelling the story, notes: "The idea that sacred texts were originally inscribed on metal tablets recurs in the Mormon belief that the *Book of Mormon* came down inscribed on gold tablets. Important documents were in fact inscribed on metal tablets and preserved in stone or marble boxes in Mesopotamia, Egypt, etc." (p. 19).

Tvedtnes draws an interesting analogy between interment of the dead in tombs and the burial of records in the ground: "Just as the dead will be resurrected, so too the records will come forth. . . . Sometimes, as in the case of the Book of Mormon, the concealed documents are placed in a coffin-like box" (pp. 24–25).

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38. Tvedtnes notes a principle that must be kept in mind throughout this book: “We need not assume that all of these tales are true, but the antiquity of some of them suggests that the concept was known anciently” (p. 101).
I was unaware that David Whitmer claimed to have seen the stone box where the plates were buried (see p. 31). A basic illustration of records kept in boxes is provided by the ark of the covenant, which held not only the tables of the covenant but other records as well (see p. 33). Tvedtnes describes the ark and the temple symbolism apparent in the cabinets (called "arks") that hold scrolls of the Torah in synagogues, including "a small curtain representing the veil that separated the holy of holies of the ancient temple or tabernacle (where the original ark of the covenant was kept) from the rest of the sanctuary" (p. 35).

I was a bit concerned when I began to notice references to the Book of Jasher (starting at p. 49). I was relieved to find in the bibliography entry (see p. 240) that Tvedtnes is simply citing it as a thirteenth-century A.D. production in Spain and not as the ancient Book of Jasher mentioned in the Bible. Since Tvedtnes includes medieval sources in this study, the inclusion of material from Jasher seems appropriate enough.

In the section on sealed books, Tvedtnes describes two types of sealing: physically sealing a document shut, as by applying an impressed wax or clay seal, and secreting a book in a hidden place. I thought Tvedtnes displayed a deft touch in his description of "the words of a book that is sealed" from Isaiah 29:11–14 (see pp. 59–60). The discussion of the "book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals" (Revelation 5:1) from the Revelation of John was also interesting (see p. 63). In this connection, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q550) mentions a scroll sealed with "seven seals of the ring of Darius, his father" (pp. 63–64).

I was particularly pleased by Tvedtnes's chapter on "Angels as Guardians of Hidden Books." A common question one hears is "What happened to the gold plates?" The answer, of course, is that the angel


40. I was unaware of the possible connections of this scroll with the book of Esther, which Tvedtnes notes (see p. 63). This was interesting to me in light of the oft-repeated commonplace that the book of Esther was not found among the scrolls.
Moroni took them back. Whenever I give this simple reply, however, I imagine in my mind’s eye the questioner turning into Dana Carvey’s *Saturday Night Live* character the “Church Lady,” arching an eyebrow and saying, “Well, isn’t that convivienient!” I found Tvedtnes’s discussion of angelic care for sacred records to be very helpful in fully understanding the Book of Mormon account.

Tvedtnes describes a kind of precedent for the Copper Scroll (see p. 113). A certain text describes how the vessels of the Jerusalem temple were hidden away when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The text describes how “Shimmur the Levite and his associates listed on a copper tablet the sacred vessels and the vessels of the Temple which were in Jerusalem and in every place.” These vessels were to remain hidden “until the advent of a legitimate king for Israel.”

Although Tvedtnes concentrates on primary sources, I would have added a citation to the classic study by John Welch to his discussion of the *Narrative of Zosimos* (see p. 134).42

Tvedtnes tells the fascinating story of the Shapira documents (see p. 138). In 1878, a Jerusalem merchant named Moses Wilhelm Shapira learned of some Arabs who, fleeing authorities, hid out in a cave in Wadi Mujib, to the east of the Dead Sea. These Arabs sold Shapira fifteen dark leather strips cut from scrolls they had found in the cave. The strips contained texts from Deuteronomy and other books of the Pentateuch, written in paleo-Hebrew script. Because these texts contained variations from the established Masoretic text, authorities pronounced them fraudulent. Humiliated and faced with the possibility of financial ruin for his purchase of the strips, Shapira

41. Tvedtnes cites John C. Reeves, *Herald of That Good Realm: Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 152–53. This underscores the continuity of such practices in pre-printing press antiquity and also illustrates why the Copper Scroll has somewhat more direct relevance to the Book of Mormon than Finley would allow.

committed suicide in March 1884. Of course, in light of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls six decades later, scholars would very much like to examine this material; unfortunately, the whereabouts of the strips is unknown.

In the section on writing on metallic plates (see p. 149), Tvedtnes points out that the practice is mentioned in Isaiah 8:1; the verse speaks of writing on a polished metal plate with an engraving tool (the key terms being mistranslated as “roll” and “pen” in the KJV). He also notes a treaty between the Jews and the Romans in the second century B.C. that was inscribed on bronze plates (see 1 Maccabees 8:22).

The brass plates had been kept in “the treasury of Laban.” Keeping books in a “treasury” may sound odd to us, but, as Tvedtnes details (see pp. 155 and following), it was a common practice anciently, such a “treasury” often being analogous to what today we would call a “library.” I would add to his discussion the thought that English “thesaurus” literally means “treasury” (i.e., a treasury of words) and derives from the Greek thesauros (“treasure, storeroom”). In this section Tvedtnes also describes variations on the theme of the genizah, a repository for worn synagogue scrolls, such as the genizah of the Old Cairo synagogue in Egypt. There, at the end of the nineteenth century, Solomon Schechter of Cambridge discovered copies of a text known as the Damascus Document that would later turn up among the Dead Sea Scrolls (see pp. 156–67).

The foregoing is but a brief sampling of the many fascinating insights Tvedtnes gleans from an extensive corpus of the literature of antiquity that relate to the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. This book not only conveys extensive information (which I always appreciate) but also provides significant insights that seem perfectly obvious only after you learn of them (my favorite kind). Tvedtnes has a real talent for being able to read the Book of Mormon in creative, new, and fulfilling ways.43 Every student of the Book of Mormon, from those with serious research interests to the more casual reader, should obtain and read this excellent study.