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Below the Mesa

THE GOLD PLATES AND ANCIENT METAL EPIGRAPHY

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Richard Bushman has called the gold plates story “the single most troublesome item in Joseph Smith’s history.”¹ Smith famously claimed to have discovered, with the help of an angel, anciently engraved gold plates buried in a hill near his home in New York from which he translated the sacred text of the Book of Mormon. Not only a source of new scripture comparable to the Bible, the plates were also a tangible artifact, which he allowed a small circle of believers to touch and handle before they were taken back into the custody of the angel. The story is fantastical and otherworldly and has sparked both devotion and skepticism as well as widely varying assessments among historians. Critical and non-believing historians have tended to assume that the presentation of material plates shows that Smith was actively engaged in religious deceit of one form or another,² while Latter-day Saint historians have been inclined to take Smith and the traditional narrative at face value. For example, Bushman writes, “Since the people who knew Joseph best treat the plates as fact, a skeptical analysis lacks evidence. A series of surmises replaces a documented narrative.”³ Recently, Anne Taves has articulated a middle way between these positions by suggesting that

1. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 58.

2. E.g., Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945); Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

3. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 58.

while Smith most likely fabricated the plates, he may nevertheless have been sincere in his belief in their spiritual authenticity and antiquity.⁴

For now, I would like to set aside the question of Smith's motivations and innermost understanding of himself and the gold plates and inquire into the more basic issue of the historical plausibility of the plates themselves. After all, whatever Smith may have said about the plates and however strong the evidence that his family and friends accepted their existence and authenticity, the gold plates and its narrative congeners (brass plates, plates of Nephi, plates of Ether, etc.) represents a historical datum capable of investigation and substantiation by itself. For not only are they claimed to be a product of remote antiquity, but are said to stem from writing cultures with roots in the ancient Near East and Israel-Judah in particular. Assuming historicity and that the peoples of the Book of Mormon were constrained and inflected by human culture and technology, we should expect to find circumstantial corroboration within the available historical record for this general picture of preserving lengthy sacred narrative on metal.

As is well known, the topic has already received extensive treatment in Latter-day Saint apologetic scholarship. In the face of general skepticism regarding the plates, Latter-day Saint scholars and scripture enthusiasts have documented archaeological evidence for writing on metal in antiquity in an effort to authenticate the Book of Mormon and buttress claims of the gold plates' ancient origin, which has typically involved constructing lists of comparative parallels.⁵ However, the weaknesses of this general approach have become

4. Ann Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates," *Numen* 61, nos. 2–3 (2014): 182–207.

5. E.g., Ariel L. Crowley, *Metal Record Plates in Ancient Times* (United States: The author, 1947); Franklin S. Harris, Jr., "Others Kept Records on Metal Plates, Too," *Instructor* 92 (1957): 318–21; H. Curtis Wright, "Metallic Documents of Antiquity," *BYU Studies* 10 (1970): 457–77; Mark E. Petersen, *Those Gold Plates!* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979); C. Wilfred Griggs, "The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 75–101; Paul R. Cheesman, *Ancient Writing on Metal Plates: Archaeological Findings Support Mormon Claims* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1985); Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988); Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS,

increasingly apparent. Not all writing on metal is equally relevant to the Book of Mormon plates, considering that inscriptions in the ancient Near East were engraved on all types of objects, were of diverse length, and featured a wide range of content and literary genres. The tendency has been to treat any and all metal inscriptions as having probative value, highlighting vague material and content parallels at the expense of a careful consideration of how their individual contexts differ from the Book of Mormon and what that may suggest about the latter's origin. In addition, there is no attempt to explain how these disparate metal epigraphic traditions gave rise to the Book of Mormon metal plates or even how the Book of Mormon's presentation of metal document record-keeping fits into the larger sweep of human writing history.

The following study aims to evaluate the Book of Mormon claims of gold and other metal documents and to determine to what degree they have credible antecedents or parallels in the broader ancient Near East. The purpose is not to defend or attack the Book of Mormon as a religious document but to gather and weigh evidence in the spirit of Bushman's recent call to bridge the conversation between believers and nonbelievers on difficult topics such as the gold plates.⁶

To that end, I will first present a comprehensive review of inscriptions on metal from the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean by region along with a brief analysis of their typologically significant features, for example, major literary genres, length, social background, and ideological and religious functions. Because I am interested in finding texts closely comparable to the Book of Mormon plates, a tradition that is alleged to have originated in

1988); John A. Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: "Out of Darkness unto Light"* (Provo: FARMS, 2000); Aaron P. Schade, "The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem: The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo: FARMS, 2004), 319–23; William J. Hamblin, "Sacred Writing on Metal Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 37–54.

6. "Will believers and unbelievers learn to talk about the miraculous elements at the foundation of Mormonism with the same even-handedness as we discuss the Utah War? Can we bridge the belief gap on such subjects as the gold plates?" (Richard Lyman Bushman, "Reading the Gold Plates," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 1 [2015]: 69).

Israel-Judah before the sixth century BCE and perhaps much earlier with the Jaredites, I will limit my investigation to inscriptions that a) date from the third millennium to fifth century BCE; b) include continuous text of more than one line, excluding mere dedications or the listing of private names; and c) were written on a flat surface, such as a plate or sheet, that mimics material used for archival writing (e.g., papyrus, leather, clay tablet, etc.), excluding arrowheads, knives, armor, statues, bowls, cups, vases, jewelry, etc. Such a broad analysis will lead to the identification of a number of common patterns in the use of metal as epigraphic support across the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean as a whole. Next, I will describe metal record-keeping as recounted in the Book of Mormon and consider how the practice fits into the above context of ancient metal epigraphy. Finally, I will critically examine the hypothesis that Israel-Judah once had a metal writing tradition that gave rise to the Book of Mormon.

Metal Epigraphy from Ancient Near East/ Eastern Mediterranean⁷

Mesopotamia

Almost all known inscriptions of continuous text recorded on metal in Mesopotamia were foundation deposits or similar building-dedicatory inscriptions, which have been catalogued and discussed by Ellis.⁸ As explained by Pearce, “Stone and metal were generally reserved for inscriptions commissioned by members of royalty, although not all royal inscriptions were written on these materials. Since Mesopotamia was poor in mineral resources, gold, silver, and basalt were imported. Metals were attested only infrequently as a writing material and were reserved for texts of importance to the crown.”⁹ The use of metal as a writing medium was

7. See the appendix for a catalogue of inscriptions from individual regions.

8. Richard S. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Yale Near Eastern Researches 2 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), 104, 188–94.

9. Laurie Pearce, “The Scribes and Scholars of Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, edited by Jack Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 4:2269.

intended to convey prestige as well as permanence, in addition to aiming to please the deity to whom the inscription was directed.¹⁰

Iran/Persia

Metal inscriptions are exclusively associated with royal authority in Iran/Persia, their function ranging from royal decree, foundation deposit, to display inscription. Valuable metal was apparently used to mark the prestige of the document owners as well as their devotion to deity.¹¹

Anatolia

Anatolia had a long and rich tradition of writing on metal, including the Hittite practice of publishing important political documents on metal tablets. As explained by Van den Hout, “Metal tablets are said to have been made in gold, silver, bronze, and iron, and such copies were probably made only of very important texts, serving as engrossed copies. Signs must have been ‘punched’ in with an instrument that imitated the impression left by a normal stylus in a clay tablet. Such metal tablets are attested for treaties, loyalty oaths and, possibly, a land grant, but also for historical texts. Only one bronze example has survived so far, containing the treaty of the Great King Tuthaliya IV (ca. 1240–ca. 1210 BCE) with Kuruntiya, viceroy in the southern province of Tarhuntassa. Treaties are known to have been deposited ‘before the deity’ and we may assume that all such engrossed copies in metal were kept there.”¹² The bronze, iron, gold, and silver documents are uniformly of royal background

10. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits*, 107, 140; Laurie E. Pearce, “Materials of Writing and Materiality of Knowledge,” in *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern and Other Studies in Honor of Tzvi Abusch*, edited by Jeffrey Stackert, Barbara N. Porter, and David P. Wright (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2010), 167–80.

11. C. L. Nimchuk, “Empire Encapsulated: The Persepolis Apadana Foundation Deposits,” in *The World of Achaemenid Persia: History, Art and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East*, edited by John Curtis and St. John Simpson (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 224; Douglas Fear, “*utā pavastāyā utā carmā grftam āha*—Written on Clay and Parchment: Old Persian Writing and Allography in Iranian,” in *Communication and Materiality: Written and Unwritten Communication in Pre-Modern Societies*, edited by Susanne Enderwitz and Rebecca Sauer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 76.

12. Theo van den Hout, “The Written Legacy of the Hittites,” in *Insights into Hittite History and Archaeology*, edited by Hermann Genz and Dirk Paul Mielke (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2011), 52–53.

and seem to have been intended to perform a symbolic display function, communicating power, wealth, and piety to both local and external audiences.

Phoenicia and Phoenician Colonies

Aside from some early inscriptions on bronze dedicatory spatula, in Phoenicia and its colonies the use of metal as a medium for writing continuous text occurs only in relation to the production of amulets.¹³ The metal sheets were typically inscribed with short incantations and apotropaic imagery, rolled up, and stored in capsules. The choice of precious metal in this case was likely a factor of the amulet owner's wealth and status; in addition, such metal had a numinous or sacred quality and therefore may have been seen to possess enhanced apotropaic properties.¹⁴

Israel-Judah

The only examples of continuous text on metal from ancient Israel-Judah are the Ketef Hinnom inscriptions, which are short incantations that functioned as amulets against demonic forces.¹⁵ As with the Phoenician inscriptions

13. Christopher Rollston, "Phoenicia and the Phoenicians," in *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient*, edited by Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2016), 284–94; Philip C. Schmitz, "Reconsidering a Phoenician Amulet," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122 (2002): 817–23; Jeremy D. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing in Inscription and Scripture: The Early History of Numbers 6:24–26* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 44–49.

14. Amir Golani, *Jewelry from the Iron Age II Levant* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 15–16; Irene J. Winter, "Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia (With some Indian Parallels)," in *Art, the Integral Vision: A Volume of Essays in Felicitation of Kapila Vatsyayan*, edited by Baidyanath N. Saraswati, Subhash C. Malik, and Madhu Khanna (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1994), 123–32; Susan Limmer, "The Social Functions and Ritual Significance of Jewelry in the Iron Age II Southern Levant" (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2007), 393–99; Christopher A. Faraone, *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 80.

15. Gabriel Barkay, Marilyn J. Lundberg, Andrew G. Vaughn, and Bruce Zuckerman, "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 334 (2004): 41–71; Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 12–42; Angelika Berlejung, "Der gesegnete Mensch. Text und Kontext von Num 6,22–27 und den Silber-amuletten von Ketef Hinnom," in *Mensch und König:*

discussed above, the choice of precious metal as material support was likely a factor of the amulet owner's wealth and status, in addition to that such metal facilitated an apotropaic function.¹⁶

South Arabia

Numerous bronze plaques have been recovered from the lands of ancient South Arabia.¹⁷ However, only a small number date from the early Sabaic period. Generally short in length, the inscriptions are dedicatory or votive in function, representing a gift to deity to commemorate a certain pious act and/or engender divine favor, and to put on display in temple structures.

Egypt

In Egypt no document on metal is presently extant before the Greco-Roman period, though the Harris Papyrus shows that metal was used much earlier in the case of royal votives intended for display in the cult. As noted by Eyre, "inscriptions [on metal] may have been commoner than the evidence suggests—metal objects were the first target for recycling—but always special in purpose."¹⁸

Ancient Greece and Greek Settlements

Writing on metal is abundantly attested in the Greek world. In fact, more inscriptions of continuous text are extant from Greece and Greek colonies than from anywhere else in the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean. The texts on bronze and lead are generally short, the longest ranging between

Studien zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments. Rüdiger Lux zum 60. Geburtstag, edited by Angelika Berlejung and Raik Heckl (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 37–62.

16. Gabriel Barkay, "The Priestly Benediction on Silver Plaques from Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem," *Tel Aviv* 19 (1992): 174; Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 42.

17. Christian Robin, "Saba' and the Sabaeans," in *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, edited by St. John Simpson (London: British Museum, 2002), 63–64; William D. Glanzman, "Arts, Crafts and Industries," in *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, edited by St. John Simpson (London: British Museum, 2002), 114; Barbara Jändl, *Altsüdarabische Inschriften auf Metall*, Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel 4 (Berlin: Wasmuth, 2009).

18. Christopher Eyre, *The Use of Documents in Pharaonic Egypt* (Corby: Oxford University Press, 2013), 32.

twenty and forty lines. No lengthy literary text has been preserved, though Pausanias reports he had seen a copy of Hesiod's *Works and Days* recorded on a lead tablet at the sanctuary of Mount Helicon in the second century CE.

With the increased development of mining in the Archaic period,¹⁹ bronze and lead suddenly come into use as an inscriptional medium from the sixth century BCE, with bronze employed “especially in regions where it is more abundant than stone or marble or where the stone is of poor quality, such as around Olympia, where the stone is a shelly limestone, difficult to engrave.”²⁰ Bronze was ordinarily used for documents of an official, normative, or public character, such as treaties, laws, contracts, wills, or dedications, and were put on display at sanctuaries. Cole explains, “Greek sanctuaries were used for the display of inscribed legal documents, in part for publicity, but also to make clear the involvement of the gods in the legal process at the human level. The inscription itself, whether on bronze plaque, stone stele, or the wall of the temple had the status of votive object, declared sacred to the god. . . . Both the inscription itself and the legal acts it contained were protected by the gods from tampering and destruction.”²¹ With regard to the use of bronze at Olympia, Sophie Minon states,

The bronze plaques once inscribed were displayed on the walls of the temples at Olympia (small fixing holes in some), though it is assured that these displayed texts were not readable since they were too small to be read from afar. They were thus sacred records by being engraved

19. Thilo Rehren, “Metallurgy, Greece and Rome,” in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, edited by Roger S. Bagnall, et al. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 4466–69.

20. Sophie Minon, email message to author, June 9, 2017. See also L. H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, rev. ed. with supplement by A. W. Johnston (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 55; Bradley H. McLean, *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods: From Alexander the Great to the Reign of Constantine (323 BC–AD 337)* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 206; Anne Kolb, “Bronze in Epigraphy,” in *New Research on Ancient Bronzes: Acta of the XVIIIth International Congress on Ancient Bronzes*, edited by Philippe Della Casa and Eckhard Deschler-Erb (Zürich: Chronos, 2015), 344.

21. Susan Guettel Cole, “Civic Cult and Civic Identity,” in *Sources for the Ancient Greek City-State: Symposium, August, 24–27 1994*, edited by Mogens Herman Hansen (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1995), 306.

on a non-perishable material and entrusted to the god (the plaque is in general called “property of Zeus”). Clearly, only a part of the archives, probably only texts of the law, was engraved. The rest was to appear on more perishable supports, such as wooden tablets. . . . [Bronze writing] serves to display, that is to say to give a form of publicity, to communicate. It is used for this purpose for its perennial character. And probably because the material is sufficiently noble to give a form of authority to the decisions and acts of public life that they carry.²²

Lead was used for private documents, such as letters, curses, and oracular questions and responses, because it was relatively inexpensive and easy to engrave.²³

Italy

Outside of Greek-populated areas in Magna Graecia, continuous text on metal is rarely attested in ancient Italy before the Roman period, limited to a few short Etruscan inscriptions on gold and lead.²⁴ The gold Pyrgi inscriptions were votive and intended for public display in the sanctuary, while the lead inscriptions appear to be of a cultic nature. As is well known, bronze was widely used by the Romans for the publication of important political and legal documents.²⁵

22. Sophie Minon, email message to author, June 9, 2017.

23. Antonia Sarri, *Material Aspects of Letter Writing in the Graeco-Roman World: 500 BC–AD 300* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 72–73; D. R. Jordan, “Early Greek Letters on Lead,” in *A History of Ancient Greek: From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, edited by Anastasios-Phoibos Christidēs and Kentro Hellēnikēs Glōssas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1355–66; Esther Eidinow and Claire Taylor, “Lead-Letter Days: Writing, Communication and Crisis in the Ancient Greek World,” *Classical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 30–62; Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, translated by Franklin Philip (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 133; McLean, *Introduction to Greek Epigraphy*, 207.

24. Luciano Agostiniani, “The Etruscan Language,” in *The Etruscan World*, edited by Jean MacIntosh Turfa (New York: Routledge, 2013), 460–64.

25. Callie Williamson, “Monuments of Bronze: Roman Legal Documents on Bronze Tablets,” *Classical Antiquity* 6 (1987): 160–83; Kolb, “Bronze in Epigraphy”; Werner Eck, “Documents on Bronze: A Phenomenon of the Roman West?,” in *Ancient Documents and their Contexts: First North American Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy (2011)*, edited by John Bodel and Nora Dimitrova (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 127–51.

Analysis of Comparative Data

From this review of inscriptions on metal from the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean, we are now in a position to identify a few common patterns in the material:

First, the inscriptions are generally short, with the majority averaging around ten lines and the longer examples representing the equivalent of several modern printed pages.

Second, the range of genres employed in writing on metal was limited, both within cultures and across the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean as a whole. The most prominent types include dedication, memorial, foundation deposit, building inscription, legal decree, treaty, incantation, and curse. The language is generally formulaic, lacking literary complexity.

Third, inscriptions on metal had a prominent symbolic function.²⁶ They were typically meant to be seen, whether by deity, other elites, or the community, and so were put on display, the most common venue being the sanctuary.

Fourth, the use of metal as epigraphic support is most commonly associated with royal sponsorship or wealthy individuals who could bear the significant expense.²⁷

Fifth, because of its high value and solidity, requiring laborious engraving, metal was not generally used as an archival material for the storing of large-scale information or a log to which content could be added incrementally. Writing on metal belonged to the sphere of skilled craftsmanship, and inscriptions tended to be produced all in one go, i.e., as complete text.

The most notable exceptions to the above patterns with regard to length and genre are *The Deeds of Šuppiluliuma* written on bronze tablets and Hesiod's *Works and Days* written on lead. The texts are not only unusually long, approaching one thousand and eight hundred lines respectively, but relatively

26. John Bodel, "Epigraphy and the Ancient Historian," in *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions*, edited by John Bodel (New York: Routledge, 2001), 19–24.

27. See Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age*, *Archaeology and Biblical Studies* 11 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 64–66.

unique in their high literary character. *Deeds* is a historiographic account of the reign of Šuppiluliuma I composed by his son Muršili II that served as prologue to an annalistic account of the latter's reign, while *Works and Days* is an epic poem combining myth and practical teaching. However, these exceptions only prove the rule with regard to the non-use of metal as archival support, since the bronze version of *Deeds* was most likely a display inscription celebrating the royal Hittite dynasty and the lead copy of *Works and Days*, if the report of Pausanias is reliable, was a votive at the sanctuary near Mount Helicon.

Metal Epigraphy in the Book of Mormon

The character of the metal plates tradition in the Book of Mormon can be gathered from evidence mostly internal to the narrative itself.

First, the use of metal documents is extensive. We have mention of at least six metal plate collections representing lengthy independent documents, including the brass plates (1 Ne. 5:11–13), small plates of Nephi (1 Ne. 9:2–4; 2 Ne. 5:30–32), large plates of Nephi (1 Ne. 9:2, 4; 19:4), plates of Zeniff (Mosiah 8:5; 22:14), plates of Mormon (W of M 1:3; 3 Ne. 5:10–11; Morm. 6:6), and plates of Ether (Mosiah 8:9; Ether 1:2). These are the primary examples of formal writing in the narrative, and indeed other epigraphic support materials such as leather skins, wood tablets, wax, or stone are never directly referenced, only a single cryptic allusion to non-plate substances (Jacob 4:1–2).

Second, the tradition is ancient and proximately of Judean-Israelite background. The plates of brass are labeled the “record of the Jews,” implied to be a national history and document tradition tracing back to the time of Joseph in Egypt (1 Ne. 5:16). Nephi, a native of Jerusalem, is responsible for constructing and initiating the large and small plate collections, which remained in use throughout Nephite history and presumably along with the plates of brass were the models upon which later plate traditions were fashioned. In addition, the Jaredites apparently had a metal epigraphic tradition independent of the Nephites, since the prophet Ether is said to have composed a history of the Jaredites on gold plates containing a continuous account from the time of Adam (Ether 1:2–4).

Third, the metal plates functioned as regular archival material, that is, they were intended primarily for informational storage (1 Ne. 5:11–13; 6:3–6;

9:2–4; 19:3–5; 2 Ne. 5:30–33; Jacob 1:2–4; 4:3; etc.). The independent metal documents contained complex historiographical and biographical narrative, interweaving multiple literary genres, and were generally of a lengthy character, representing the equivalent of hundreds of modern printed pages. They also tended to be composed incrementally, with a single author adding to a document on multiple occasions or multiple authors contributing to the same document. For example, the brass plates were updated with prophecies from Jeremiah in the time of Lehi (1 Ne. 5:13); Nephi writes his personal ministry on the small plates after the separation from the Lamanites and subsequently expands with additional teaching material (2 Ne. 5:30–32; 10:2; 31:1–2; 33:3); Jacob and his descendants fill out the small plates of Nephi (Jacob 1:1–2; Jarom 1:1, 15; Omni 1:30); and Moroni fills out the plates of Mormon with chapter 8 of Mormon through Moroni (Morm. 8:1, 5).

Fourth, metal documents were created, maintained, and handed down by the spiritual leaders of Book of Mormon peoples. Nephi kept the large plates before being made king by the Nephites (1 Ne. 19:1) and passed on the small plates to the prophet Jacob (Jacob 1:1–2), ordering that they be handed down “from one prophet to another” (1 Ne. 19:4). Although the large plates tradition was kept by the kings of the Nephites from Nephi to Mosiah₁ (W of M 1:10), beginning with prophet-king Benjamin the small and large plates were handed down together. After Mosiah₂ and Alma the Younger (Mosiah 28:20), they became solely the preserve of prophets again (Alma 37:1–2; 3 Ne. 1:2; 4 Ne. 1:19, 47–48; Morm. 1:2–4; 6:6; 8:5). Ether, the author of the Jaredite history, was also a prophet (Ether 1:2; 12:2). The major authors of the Book of Mormon were not only prophet-scribes but skilled craftsmen responsible for having fashioned the metal plates (1 Ne. 1:17; 19:1; 3 Ne. 5:11; cf. Morm. 8:5) and engraved them (1 Ne. 19:1; Jacob 4:1, 3; Morm. 1:4).

Finally, the metal plates were apparently in the form of a codex. According to Joseph Smith’s description of the gold plates, “each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin. They were . . . bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole” (1842). This means that at least the plates of Mormon were constructed in codex form, with multiple leaves bound on one side. However, there can be little doubt that this form applied to other plate collections as well. Not only are the documents referred to

variously with plural and singular forms (“plates” and “record”), but the collections are ordered sequentially such that they have beginnings and ends. For example, Lehi is said to have searched the plates of brass “from the beginning,” which contained “the five books of Moses . . . and also a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” (1 Ne. 5:10–12). In abridging the plates of Ether, Moroni omits “the first part of the record, which speaks concerning the creation of the world, and also of Adam, and an account from that time even to the great tower” and treats only the part of the narrative “from the tower down until [the Jaredites] were destroyed” (Ether 1:3, 5). The small plates of Nephi are obviously sequential, and the same can be assumed for the large plates, which is the source behind the plates of Mormon. Such lengthy sequential narrative seems to presuppose codex-like organization, since without a binding the metal sheets would be prone to disarrangement and confusion, and the employment of simple catchphrases or colophons to link so many together would have been impracticable.²⁸

Accepting the accuracy of this description, the Book of Mormon metal writing tradition clearly stands outside of documented practices of ancient metal epigraphy. Salient factors include the following:

- consistent use of metal to the exclusion of other epigraphic support materials
- extensive use of gold in particular
- exceptional length
- complex melding of literary genres
- archival informational storage function of the plates
- incremental addition to plate documents
- non-mention of a display role for plates in sanctuary
- provenance of metal epigraphy outside of royal power and politics

28. For ancient strategies of linking large amounts of text together, see Alan Millard, “Books in the Late Bronze Age in the Levant,” in *Past Links: Studies in the Languages and Cultures of the Ancient Near East*, edited by Shlomo Izre’el, Itamar Singer, and Ran Zadok (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 171–81.

- combination of scribal art and metal craftsmanship into single author
- codex form

As is well known, the codex form developed in the Roman period and gradually replaced the scroll over the first millennium CE.²⁹

Taken altogether, the presentation of metal epigraphy in the Book of Mormon is deeply implausible on historical grounds. It is not simply a matter that the Book of Mormon lacks any credible parallel or antecedent writing on metal from the ancient Near East, since ultimately this is an argument from silence and it is always possible that further metal documents may eventually be found, but the fact that the social, political, economic, technological, and literary features of Book of Mormon metal writing so strongly contradict what we would expect for the time and culture. Multiple lines of evidence all contribute to the case for disconfirmation.

Metal Epigraphy in Israel-Judah

We saw above that the Book of Mormon implies that the proximate background of the plates tradition was ancient Israel-Judah, from which derived the plates of brass and Nephi, who was responsible for initiating the large and small plates in Nephite record-keeping. So Latter-day Saint scholars have been keen to establish potential examples of metal epigraphy in archaeological and biblical sources, both from Israel-Judah as well as later Second Temple Judaic culture.³⁰ Aside from the Ketef Hinnom inscriptions, which we have already discussed do not provide a viable parallel to the Book of

29. J. van Haelst, "Les origines du codex," in *Les Débuts du codex*, edited by Alain Blanchard, *Bibliologia* 9 (Brepols, Belgium: Turnhout, 1989), 12–35; Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), 124–35; June Ashton, *Scribal Habits in the Ancient Near East: C.3000 BCE to the Emergence of the Codex* (Sydney: Mandelbaum, 2008), 177–79; Adam Bülow-Jacobsen, "Writing Materials in the Ancient World," in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, edited by Roger S. Bagnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–29.

30. See Crowley, *Metal Record Plates*; Nibley, *Since Cumorah*; William J. Adams, Jr., "Lehi's Jerusalem and Writing on Metal Plates," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994): 204–06; Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*; Kevin L. Barney, "A More Responsible Critique," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 97–146; Hamblin, "Sacred Writing on Metal Plates."

Mormon because of their short length and genre as magical incantations, other proposed examples of writing on metal include Exodus 28:36; Job 19:23–24; Isaiah 8:1; Isaiah 30:8; 1 Maccabees 8:22; 14:48–49; and the Copper Scroll from Qumran. I will briefly look at each of these texts and consider whether as secondary and/or late evidence they point to the existence of an earlier metal writing tradition that by chance has not yet been revealed through archaeological excavation.

Exodus 28:36: “You shall make a crown/rosette [šyš] of pure gold, and engrave on it the seal inscription, ‘Holy to YHWH.’”

Hamblin writes, “The oldest example of Hebrew writing on metal is the engraved gold plate attached to the front of the turban of the high priest (at least 10C). According to Exodus 28:36, Moses was ordered to ‘make a plate (*tzitz*) of pure gold and engrave upon it as an engraved seal (*khotem*), ‘Holy to Yahweh.’”³¹ However, there are various problems with this characterization. Aside from the fact that the dating of the passage is uncertain, we have many more reliable examples of early Hebrew writing on metal objects, and the translation of *šyš* with “plate” is undoubtedly incorrect.³² The inscription is brief and therefore unremarkable.

Job 19:23–24: “O, would that then my words be written! Oh, would that they be engraved [wyḥqw] in an inscription [spr]! With an iron stylus and lead, they be hewn upon a rock forever.”

Noting that the verb *ḥqq* properly means “to engrave,” Barney supposes that *spr* in this context may refer to a bronze or copper tablet, based on a proposal advanced by earlier biblical scholars that the Hebrew word is related to Akkadian *siparru* bronze.³³ On this understanding, the bronze and rock material are two examples of writing intended to be permanent. However, this explanation of *spr* is speculative and unnecessary. In the context of the

31. Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates,” 40.

32. William H. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 446–47.

33. “Responsible Critique,” 107–08.

passage, which is about Job's words being written, the consonants *s-p-r* are more easily related to the sphere of writing.³⁴ Not only that, Hebrew already had a common word for "bronze." Others have observed that *spr* can mean "inscription," which provides a nice parallel to the following line in verse 24 about having words cut into rock with an engraving tool. Suriano has recently argued that the passage describes a "single location of writing that is consistent with a tomb inscription."³⁵

Isaiah 8:1: "And YHWH said to me, 'Take a large stele [glywn gdwl] and write on it with a human engraving tool [hrt], 'Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz.'"

Although *glywn* is a hapax whose precise meaning is unknown, Latter-day Saint scholars have identified it as another possible example of a metal table because *hrt* elsewhere denotes a graving tool used on hard surfaces and a similarly spelled *glynym* appears in Isaiah 3:23, which has been interpreted as "polished metal, i.e., mirrors."³⁶ However, this view meets with several difficulties. First, it is not clear that *glynym* in Isaiah 3:23 means "mirrors," since the references that precede and follow it in the catalogue appear to be articles of clothing. The same term has been linked to Akkadian *gulēnu/gulīnu/gulānu* "overgarment" and Hebrew *glwm* "coat, wrap."³⁷ Second, the story of the *glywn gdwl* presumes that it was publicly visible and therefore legible to observers. A relatively small bronze mirror would serve poorly

34. Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 15 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), 143–44; Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Studies* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), 204; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job, A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 292; Matthew J. Suriano, "Death, Disinheritance, and Job's Kinsman-Redeemer," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 1 (2010): 51–52; C. L. Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013), 802–03.

35. Suriano, "Death, Disinheritance," 51.

36. Crowley, *Metal Record Plates*, 16; Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 149; Barney, "Responsible Critique," 106–07.

37. Hugh G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 282–83; Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary*, translated by Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 155.

for this purpose. Third, Hebrew already had a straightforward terminology for mirror, *mr'h* or *r'y*, and tablet, *lwḥ*. Fourth, the command to “take” a large *glywn* and write on it implies that whatever the object was it was relatively accessible and common, that there were large *glywns* as well as small *glywns*. This would have not been the case for a luxury object such as a bronze mirror or tablet. Fifth, the *glywn* is unlikely to be metal considering that the term derives from a simple root (*gly* “to uncover” or *gll* “to roll”) and lacks any specification for the material of the object. Lastly, the recent analysis by Williamson plausibly relates *glywn* to Aramaic *gll* and Akkadian *galālu* and identifies the object as a stone slab or stele.³⁸

Isaiah 30:8: “Now come, write it [ktbh] on a tablet [lwḥ]! Come [?], inscribe [ḥqh] it on a scroll [spr]! That it may be a for a future day as a witness forever.”

Some Latter-day Saint exegetes have related one or both parts of this passage to metal epigraphy.³⁹ For example, Barney writes, “The same verb and noun combination as in the second line appears in Job 19:23 in a similar context of a writing intended to last a long time (KJV ‘for ever and ever’). Therefore the allusion in Isaiah 30:8 may also be to a writing on a bronze tablet, with the first writing (on wood) containing the headings or a summary, and with the second writing (on metal) containing the full message in permanent form.”⁴⁰ However, a basic problem with such a reading is that the material of the “tablet” and “scroll” are left unspecified, suggesting that neither has in view rare metal. In the Hebrew Bible *lwḥ* generally refers to flat pieces of stone or wood, and *spr* means simply, “writing, document, scroll.” As stand-alone terms they do not point in the direction of metal epigraphy. Similar to Job 19:23–24, *spr* is unlikely to mean “bronze” reflecting Akkadian *sipparu* since the immediate context relates to the writing down of words.⁴¹

38. Hugh G. M. Williamson, “The Practicalities of Prophetic Writing in Isaiah 8:1,” in *On Stone and Scroll: Essays in Honour of Graham Ivor Davies*, edited by James K. Aitken, Katharine J. Dell, and Brian A. Mastin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 357–69.

39. Crowley, *Metal Record Plates*, 28; Barney, “Responsible Critique,” 109.

40. “Responsible Critique,” 109.

41. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28–39: A Continental Commentary*, translated by Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 139–40.

The passage is nonetheless enigmatic and has engendered diverse interpretations among biblical scholars, including wax writing board, clay tablet, and papyrus scroll.⁴² None of these are particularly satisfactory, since a wax inscription would be a poor material to last very long, clay tablets were not customarily used in Israel-Judah and neither are they known to have been designated *lwh* or *spr* in Hebrew, and papyrus scrolls were never inscribed or cut into. My own preference is to take *lwh* and *spr* with their standard meanings as “a hard tablet-like surface” and “scroll document” and note that the expected verbs have been reversed in each case, *ktb-lwh* and *hqq-spr* rather than *ktb-spr* and *hqq-lwh*.⁴³ The immediate and broader context seems to play with the notion of written revelation as authoritative (see Isa. 28:9–13; 29:11–13, 18), so the author has alluded to stone tablets and papyrus scrolls upon which to record YHWH’s condemnation of his people, suggesting that the prophetic *torah* of Isaiah 28:9 functions to counter an alternative written *torah*. In this context, *lwh* and *spr* can only evoke authoritative documents such as the famous stone tablets of the law and other Deuteronomistic affiliated writings from the Pentateuch. The language is thus rhetorical and ideologically constructed, going so far as to reverse the verb and noun combinations of *ktb-spr* and *hqq-lwh*.

42. K. Galling, “Tafel, Buch und Blatt,” in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, edited by H. Goedicke (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 207–23; A. Baumann, “לוח, הלוח,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, edited by G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H. J. Fabry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975–2015), 7:480–83; J. D. Moore, “Writing Religion: A Comparative Study of Ancient Israelite Scribes, their Writing Materials and their Methods Used in the Writing of the Hebrew Prophecies” (master’s thesis, Brandeis University, 2011); A.L.H.M. van Wieringen, “לוח, הלוח, board, tablet,” *KLY Database: Utensils in the Hebrew Bible*, 2011, available at <http://www.otw-site.eu/KLY/lwj.pdf>; William Henry Irwin, *Isaiah 28–33: Translation with Philological Notes* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1977), 79; J. C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1997), 158; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 415; J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 388.

43. Hugh G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah’s Role in the Composition and Redaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 104.

1 Maccabees 8:22; 14:48–49

1 Maccabees 8:22–32 and 14:27–49 report two separate inscriptions on metal from the second century BCE, bronze tablets containing a treaty between Judas Maccabeus and Rome and a decree affirming the election of Simon as high priest, military commander, and ruler in Judea. As rare examples of continuous text on metal from the Second Temple period, they have often been thought to support the existence of an earlier Jewish metal epigraphic tradition.⁴⁴ However, these inscriptions fit well within the standard use of bronze during the Greco-Roman period, when treaties and legal decrees were created for display in public spaces and sanctuaries.⁴⁵ The texts are basically short, functional, and monothematic, their political importance underlining the exceptional nature of bronze as epigraphic support.

Copper Scroll from Qumran (3Q15)

For Latter-day Saints, the Copper Scroll is significant not only because it demonstrates the use of metal as a writing material among Jews but because it was hidden in the ground for safekeeping.⁴⁶ For example, Hamblin writes, “The most well-known example of Hebrew writing on metal plates is the famous Copper Scroll (3Q15) from Qumran (1C AD), containing a list of hidden temple treasures. Although the origin and purpose of the Copper Scroll is widely debated, it is a clear example of an attempt to preserve an important sacred record by writing on copper/bronze (Heb. *nechushah*) plates and then hiding the document.”⁴⁷ However, the use of the Copper Scroll as a parallel to the Book of Mormon breaks down on closer analysis. First, the text is formally that of an inventory or list, describing the locations of various hidden treasures in a dry, enumerative style, lacking a narrative framework of any kind. Second, the use of metal as epigraphic support is

44. Crowley, *Metal Record Plates*, 13–14; Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 149; Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates,” 40–41; Barney, “Responsible Critique,” 106.

45. Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev, “Josephus, Bronze Tablets and Greek Inscriptions,” *L’Antiquité Classique* 64 (1995): 211–15; Linda Zollschan, *Rome and Judaea: International Law Relations, 162–100 BCE* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 18–21.

46. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*.

47. Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates,” 41.

unique to this one text. No examples of biblical or para-biblical literature written on metal were found in the archive at Qumran.⁴⁸ Although the reason why copper was used in this case is unknown, and theories range from durability intended for the preservation of valuable information, ritual purity, or dependence on biblical analogs,⁴⁹ the fact that expensive metal was used to record a list of buried treasure seems unlikely to be mere coincidence. Third, the genre and historicity of the text is uncertain, and some scholars have argued that it is a literary fiction.⁵⁰ Fourth, the document was constructed to resemble the form of a regular parchment scroll, highlighting its unusual material character as well as distinguishing it from the codex-like plates of the Book of Mormon. Fifth, the provenance of the Copper Scroll in an underground cave is a feature shared in common with the other Dead Sea Scrolls, so its deposition there should be explained in relation to these other documents, not apart from them.

In sum, none of the arguments for finding parallels to the Book of Mormon plates in the Bible or Second Temple Judaic culture are convincing. Either the biblical passages admit of more plausible readings or the examples of authentic writing on metal bear little in common to the Book

48. Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

49. Cf. George J. Brooke, "Introduction," in *Copper Scroll Studies*, edited by George J. Brooke and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 40* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 7; Émile Puech, *The Copper Scroll (3Q15): A Reevaluation. A New Reading, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 463; Jesper Hogenhaven, "Geography and Ideology in the Copper Scroll (3Q15) from Qumran," in *Northern Lights on the Dead Sea Scrolls: Proceedings of the Nordic Qumran Network 2003–2006*, edited by Anders Klostergaard Petersen, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 87–88.

50. Jozef T. Milik, "Le Rouleau de Cuivre provenant de la Grotte 3Q (3Q15)," in *Le rouleau de cuivre*, edited by Maurice Baillet, Jozef T. Milik, and Roland de Vaux, *DJD 3* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 201–302; Hogenhaven, "Geography and Ideology"; cf. Al Wolters, "Apocalyptic and the Copper Scroll," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (1990): 145–54; Piotr Muchowski, "The Origin of 3Q15: Forty Years of Discussion," in *Copper Scroll Studies*, edited by George J. Brooke and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 40* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 257–70.

of Mormon narrative. Although metal was undoubtedly used as an epigraphic medium in Israel-Judah from early times, there is no evidence to support the assumption that it figured in an established scribal tradition of lengthy literary composition or archival storage.

Concluding Thoughts

The Book of Mormon is an impressive literary and cultural artifact. It reflects significant religious creativity and imagination and as such is deserving of careful study and appreciation. Whatever the book's origins, the text stands on its own merits. But while the narrative's world-making ability is real enough, its status as a translation of an ancient document is most unlikely, which is perhaps nowhere better seen than in its claims regarding gold and other metal plates as the original sources from which the document was produced. Comparison of documented practices of metal epigraphy from throughout the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean show that the Book of Mormon tradition of writing extensive literary compositions on metal for archival purposes was conspicuously outside the norm, without historical precedent or parallel. In addition, biblical and archaeological evidence do not support the notion that Israel-Judah was exceptional or distinctive with regard to its use of metal as epigraphic support. Metal was not employed for the writing of continuous literary text, which was reserved for papyrus, leather, wax tablet, and wood, all perishable materials.⁵¹

It is worth noting as well that the problem of metal plates cannot be resolved by resorting to the explanation of culturally mediated (mis)translation, since the nature of the plates and plate writing are so thoroughly described in the narrative. For Joseph Smith to have gotten this aspect of the "translation" so wrong and inserted his own ideas into the story world, we may as well no longer call the Book of Mormon a translation.

On the other hand, in contrast with the Book of Mormon's divergence from almost all aspects of ancient metal epigraphy, the notion of ancient

51. André Lemaire, "Writing and Writing Materials," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:999–1008; Ashton, *Scribal Habits*, 20–42; Moore, "Writing Religion."

peoples having composed lengthy documents on metal in codex-like form was current in the world of Joseph Smith.⁵²

Appendix

The appendix to this article has been made available exclusively on the Dialogue website. To see Ryan Thomas's exhaustive catalog of known examples of metal writing in antiquity, please visit Dialogue online at <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/articles/the-gold-plates-appendix>.

52. Michael G. Reed, "The Notion of Metal Records in Joseph Smith's Day" (paper presented at the Summer Seminar on Mormon Culture, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Aug. 18, 2011, available at <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=3468&index=9>); Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (1993): 157.