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KnoWhy #366 - Why Were the Plates Present During the Translation of the Book of Mormon?

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Abstract: People are sometimes surprised to discover that the plates of the Book of Mormon were not regularly used during the process of its translation. Most often, they simply lay covered with a linen cloth on a nearby table. This has caused some to wonder why the plates were necessary at all. This KnoWhy explores the following possible reasons: (1) The engraved characters copied from their pages helped strengthen the faith of Martin Harris and others. (2) The plates' tangible reality was an ever-present reminder that Joseph's words were derived from an actual record of ancient prophets. (3) Their veiled presence meaningfully symbolized Jesus Christ's full participation in the translation.



Moroni Hides the Plates in the Hill Cumorah (Moroni Burying the Plates), by Tom Lovell

Why Were the Plates Present During the Translation of the Book of Mormon?

“O my sons, I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true. ... and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes.”

Mosiah 1:6

The Know

People are sometimes surprised to discover that the plates of the Book of Mormon were not regularly used during the process of its translation.¹ While translating, Joseph Smith would typically place his face into a hat to block out ambient light.² He would then, according to witnesses, read aloud the words which miraculously appeared in a seer stone or in the interpreters, and a scribe would record them.³

As for the plates themselves, Emma Smith reported that they “often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth.”⁴ Other witnesses recalled that on a few occasions they were kept “in a nearby box under the bed or even hidden in the Whitmer’s barn during translation.”⁵ This has caused some to wonder why the plates were necessary at all. If Joseph Smith wasn’t actively consulting them during the translation, then why were they covered with a cloth and placed in some nearby and usually visible location?

Initially, the plates *did* serve a practical purpose. Joseph Smith copied down some of their engraved characters,

and Martin Harris took them to several distinguished scholars back east to verify their authenticity, as well as Joseph’s ability to translate them.⁶ Martin, who eventually mortgaged his farm to fund the publication of the Book of Mormon, came away from this trip more convinced than ever that the plates were both real and authentic.⁷

There is also some indication that Joseph was at least occasionally aware of the relationship between the plates and the words he was dictating. He once explained that “the Title Page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left-hand side of the collection or book of plates.”⁸ David Whitmer once stated that while looking into the seer stone, Joseph Smith saw a “parchment, on which would appear the characters of the plates in a line at the top, and immediately below would appear the translation in English.”⁹ How well Joseph Smith regularly understood the correlation between the English text and the characters on the plates, however, is uncertain.

Another important consideration is that the presence of the plates helped confirm Joseph Smith's revelatory claims.¹⁰ Anthony Sweat insightfully noted, "The Book of Mormon text didn't just pass through Joseph's trance-induced revelatory mind; its palpable relics passed through a clothing frock, hollowed log, cooper's shop, linen napkin, wooden chest, fireplace hearth and barrel of beans."¹¹ According to Michael MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat, the plates were "in essence the body for the spiritual words that fell from Joseph Smith's lips as he translated," and they helped instill "confidence in the minds of Joseph and his family and friends" that his words were derived from an actual ancient record.¹²

While the participants and observers involved in protecting and translating the plates weren't allowed to view them directly, they often encountered them through senses other than sight. Drawing upon multiple historical accounts, Neal Rappleye explained, "They felt, lifted, and moved this object around (while covered). They could feel the weight, contours, and shape of the object well enough to discern that it was not blocks of wood or stones. They could lift the individual pages (or plates), hear them make a metallic rustling sound as they moved, and feel that they were bound by three rings."¹³

Even though they most often lay covered and unused on the table, they provided a constant visual reminder of the Book of Mormon's tangible reality.¹⁴ As King Benjamin taught, "O my sons, I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true. ... and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes" (Mosiah 1:6).¹⁵

The Why

In addition to these practical considerations, the plates meaningfully represented the presence of the Lord and His involvement in the translation process. This spiritual symbolism can be drawn out from several scriptural accounts, where the Lord openly revealed Himself to a chosen prophet but then obscured His identity by some type of veil when other followers were present.

When leading the Israelites through the wilderness, the Lord privately spoke with Moses "face to face" (Exodus 33:11). But when making His presence known to the entire camp, He covered Himself "by day in a pillar of a cloud ... and by night in a pillar of fire" (Exodus 13:21).

Similarly, when the Jaredites journeyed toward their promised land, the "Lord did go before them, and did talk with them as he stood in a cloud, and gave directions whither they should travel" (Ether 2:5). Only the brother of Jared, their prophetic leader, was able to see beyond the veil and enter into the presence of the Lord" (Ether 3:6–20).

Just as Moses and the brother of Jared were the only ones allowed to fully enter into the Lord's presence, Joseph Smith was the only one initially allowed to fully view the plates. For everyone else, the plates, like the Lord Himself, were present and yet veiled—just out of sight, but never fully out of mind. In the Israelite and Jaredite exodus stories, the Lord's veiled presence provided a visible reminder that it was truly God Himself, and not just the prophet, who was actively guiding them toward the Promised Land. Likewise, the covered plates were a constant reminder that the words which Joseph Smith was dictating were not his own; they were being given to him by Jesus Christ (2 Nephi 27:20).

Not only do such parallels reveal the symbolic relationship between Jesus Christ and the Book of Mormon, but they also can apply to us as individuals. We, like the witnesses involved in the translation, must initially rely on the testimonies of prophets like Moses and Joseph Smith.¹⁶ Although we cannot directly see the Lord for ourselves, sacred experiences, such as partaking of the sacrament,¹⁷ allow us to indirectly *feel* His presence in our lives.

Eventually, some of the participants and witnesses of the translation were given full access to the plates and were privileged to "behold and view these things as they are" and even to handle the plates themselves (Doctrine and Covenants 5:13).¹⁸

Similarly, the Lord wants each of us to prepare to fully enter into His presence. In 1831, the Lord declared to His Saints, "I am in your midst and ye cannot see me; But the day soon cometh that ye shall see me, and know that I am" (Doctrine and Covenants 38:7–8). In the Lord's due time, we too may one day see the resurrected body, and feel the marks of the wounds in the hands, feet, and side of Him whom we first only saw with an eye of faith (Doctrine and Covenants 88:68; 93:1).¹⁹

These insights—both practical and spiritual—suggest that rather than being unnecessary, the physical plates

may have been essential to the translation process. The engraved characters copied from their pages helped strengthen the faith of Martin Harris and others. Their tangible reality was an ever-present reminder that Joseph's words were derived from an actual record of ancient prophets. And their veiled presence meaningfully symbolized Jesus Christ's full participation in the translation.

As Elder Jeffery R. Holland testified, "the reality of those plates, the substance of them if you will, and the evidence that comes to us from them in the form of the Book of Mormon is at the heart, at the very center, of the hope and testimony and conviction of this work that is unshakably within me forever."²⁰

Further Reading

Neal Rappleye, "Idle and Slothful Strange Stories': Book of Mormon Origins and the Historical Record," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 21–37.

Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and

Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 86–89.

Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 61–79.

Anthony Sweat, "Hefted and Handled: Tangible Interactions with Book of Mormon Objects," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 43–59.

Daniel C. Peterson, "Tangible Restoration: The Witnesses and What They Experienced," 2006 FairMormon Conference presentation, 31–33, online at fairmormon.org.

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Notes

1. There are some reports that Joseph Smith used the plates during the translation process, but these seem to have mostly come from secondary sources. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 86–87; John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd edition (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2017), 135, 161, 172, primary documents nos. 23, 77, and 95.

2. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 68–70.

3. See MacKay and Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts," 65–68, 70–71.

4. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *The Saint's Herald* 26, no. 19 (October 1, 1879): 290. For historical accounts that agree with Emma's description, see Welch, "The Miraculous Timing of the Translation," 145, 153, 166, 184, primary documents nos. 43, 59, 86, 110, 111.

5. MacKay and Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts," 71.

6. See Richard E. Bennett, "Martin Harris's 1828 Visit to Luther Bradish, Charles Anthon, and Samuel Mitchell," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 103–115; Richard E. Bennett, "Martin Harris and Three Wise Men," *BYU Speeches*, June 29, 2010, online at speeches.byu.org; Richard E. Bennett, "'Read This I Pray Thee': Martin Harris and the Three Wise Men of the East," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 178–216; Richard E. Bennett, "A Nation Now Extinct,' American Indian Origin Theories as of 1820: Samuel L. Mitchell, Martin Harris, and the New York Theo-

- ry,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 30–51; Richard E. Bennett, “A Very Particular Friend’: Luther Bradish,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 63–82; Michael Hubbard MacKay, “Git Them Translated’: Translating the Characters on the Gold Plates,” in *Approaching Antiquity*, 83–116; MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 39–59.
7. See Bennett, “Martin Harris’s 1828 Visit,” 105. See also Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, “For the Sum of Three Thousand Dollars,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 4–11, 66–67; Book of Mormon Central, “How Did Martin Harris Help Bring Forth the Book of Mormon? (2 Nephi 27:15),” *KnoWhy* 291 (March 24, 2017).
8. History, 1838–1856, volume A-1, p. 34, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed July 21, 2017, online at josephsmithpapers.org.
9. This report comes from an interview with the *Kansas City Journal* in 1881, as cited in Welch, “The Miraculous Timing of the Translation,” 166, primary document no. 86.
10. Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction: Not So Easily Dismissed: Some Facts for Which Counterexplanations of the Book of Mormon Will Need to Account,” *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): xxiv argues that the presence of the plates makes it difficult to “contend that there were no Nephites but that Joseph Smith was nonetheless an inspired prophet. If the plates really existed, somebody made them. And if no Nephites existed to make them, then either Joseph Smith, or God, or somebody else seems to have been engaged in simple fraud. The testimony of the witnesses exists, I think, to force a dichotomous choice: true or false?”
11. Anthony Sweat, “Hefted and Handled: Tangible Interactions with Book of Mormon Objects,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 44.
12. MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 87.
13. Neal Rappleye, “‘Idle and Slothful Strange Stories’: Book of Mormon Origins and the Historical Record,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 26.
14. For further discussion of the tangible plates and the artifacts that accompanied them, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Tangible Restoration: The Witnesses and What They Experienced,” FairMormon Conference, 2006, online at fairmormon.org.
15. See David A. Bednar, “Because We Have Them before Our Eyes,” *Ensign*, April 2006, online at lds.org.
16. In Doctrine and Covenants 28:2, the Lord Himself compared Joseph Smith to Moses.
17. Just as Christ’s body lay covered in His tomb, and just as the linen-covered plates often lay on the table in plain sight during the translation, so too do the emblems of the sacrament, when not being administered by the Priesthood, lie covered on a table during LDS sacrament meetings.
18. In an encounter with Theodore Turley, John Whitmer, one of the Eight Witnesses, declared, “I now say, I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides. I handled them.” Welch, “The Miraculous Timing of the Translation,” 178, primary document no. 102. These engravings meaningfully correspond to Christ’s wounded flesh and the prints of the nails in His hands and feet. Just as Book of Mormon prophets took great care and effort to engrave each individual character into the plates (Jacob 4:1–2), Christ has “graven [each of us] upon the palms of [His] hands” through His infinite Atonement (Isaiah 49:16). See Book of Mormon Central, “What Does It Really Mean to Have Charity? (Moroni 7:45),” *KnoWhy* 361 (September 5, 2017).
19. See Doctrine and Covenants 84:19–25. Also see Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Jesus Minister to the People One by One? (3 Nephi 17:21),” *KnoWhy* 209 (October 14, 2016).
20. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Greatness of the Evidence,” Chiasmus Jubilee, August 16, 2017, online at bookofmormon-central.org.