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Were the Brass Plates Written in Egyptian? - II

Author(s): Thomas W. Brookbank

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Abstract: Looking at a variety of cultural and linguistic aspects to support his point of view, the author defends the Latter-day Saint belief that the brass plates were written in Egyptian.

Were the Brass Plates Written in Egyptian?

By T. W. Brookbank.

II.

Joseph was powerful and very probably rich. He knew, from the statement which Jacob had made, namely, that his descendants were to grow into a multitude of nations, that his father's prophecies had a long time to run before their entire fulfillment could be written into history. In the time of Job plates of lead (Job 19:24) were sometimes used for writing upon, and tables or tablets for the same purpose are spoken of in Isa. 38:8 and Hab. 2:2; but the material of which they were made is not mentioned; and so it is very probable that Joseph knew that metal was sometimes substituted for recording purposes instead of the papyrus in common use. He had received from his father a revelation and blessing which were far from the ordinary. He knew from that word that his family was a highly favored one in the sight of the Almighty. He held a high position in the world as the prime minister of the mighty king of Egypt, and so just a bit of natural human pride, if nothing else, would lead him to choose something out of the ordinary upon which to record his extraordinary blessings and those of his sons. Papyrus was too common to use on such an occasion, and besides, writings on it would lose some or much of their luster when handed down to distant generations to come. A plate of lead would seem dull in view of what he had to record on it, and shall we not say that he wanted something that should harmonize with the furnishings of his home, and reflect

credit on him as a mighty ruler in Egypt, and so what is more likely than that he hit upon brass or even gold as the material for a plate upon which to make that first record of God's revelations and prophecies to him and his sons, and that he did the recording in the Egyptian characters as that was the language of his family and his own likewise.

After the Deluge when God began His redeeming work among mankind, Abraham was chosen to stand at the head of the Lord's people; but at last there came a time when the Almighty saw fit to announce His purpose of separating some of them from their brethren and of settling them in distant lands where they should become a mighty people, and a head for the separated people was chosen by the Lord in the person of Joseph, who had been separated from his native land and family connections in the days of his youth. The selection of a head for the to-be-separated Israelites was but consistent with the Lord's ways in all ages among His chosen ones. So it was in the Abrahamic Dispensation, in the Mosaic, in the Christian, and in this great work of the Lord's in these latter days, it is the same. Now, these respective heads have, in every instance, been favored by the Almighty with special communications and instructions from Himself, and so we may be sure that Joseph, who was to stand at the head of a marvelous work of the Lord, reaching through many centuries, was not left without all needful instructions and assurances from on high respecting the development of that

work, so far as it was felt within the scope of man's power to bring it about. The Book of Mormon states that Joseph did have many great covenants of the Lord made unto him aside from those given to him by the mouth of Jacob, and that he became a prophet of the Lord declaring unto the people many things pertaining to future generations of his seed. Considering the high position to which Joseph had been called as the head of a multitude of nations, inspiration and revelation from God were to be expected. The Book of Mormon merely records what we see was sure to come to pass in Joseph's life when performing the duties of his office as a founder of many Israelitish communities. When Joseph received directly from the Lord those additional revelations and prophecies concerning the great work in store for him and his descendants, they would certainly be recorded, and for reasons already mentioned, would be written in the Egyptian language, and on enduring material for the time they were to continue in service was long, and so an additional plate of brass or of gold, or perhaps, a number of them became necessary for recording purposes by the Egyptian speaking branch of the house of Israel. This branch, too, if Judah be excepted, was of unequalled importance to that house, though in its early history it was half Egyptian. Thus we see from circumstances in this case, as they have been reviewed in these remarks, and which carry with themselves an assurance which is founded on the strongest logical inference possible, the beginning of the use of brass plates or of gold for sacred writings, and the employment of Egyptian hieroglyphics when inscribing the record on them are to be accredited

to Joseph, Pharaoh's Prime Minister, or to his orders.

The Book of Mormon states that the covenants, prophecies, etc., which Joseph received from the Lord were written upon the brass plates. Not to have made mention of this fact, on the part of that book, would have been an omission hard to explain; for it is just as certain that they would be recorded as sacred communications from the Lord, and given a place along with Joseph's appointment or commission from the Lord to be the head of the Israelites who should "run over the wall" or, in other terms, become a "multitude of nations in the midst of the earth," as it is undeniably certain that he would get communications of one kind or another from on high after being Divinely called to the leadership of his people.

But when some of Joseph's descendants should be separated, in the due time of the Lord, from their brethren in Palestine, they were not to be one whit less Israelites in character, purpose, and, in a word, in the whole round of their lives, than they had been before the separation occurred, or than those who remained behind in the land of Caanan should continue to be. They were still to continue to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and were to obey the same laws and observe the same ordinances that all other descendants of Abraham were under obligations to obey or observe, and so from the very necessities of the case the Mosaic laws and ordinances had to be incorporated in the sacred records which Joseph so manifestly had made the beginning of for the benefit and service of his descendants. Then, further, as other prophets, known to us as Biblical, came forth from time to time and spoke of

things which related more or less particularly to Joseph's people and their great work, their prophecies, too, would be written on the metal plates, and since the history of all the Israelites belonged to them alike while they lived as a single community or until the time arrived when the branch from the parent stock was to be settled in its own land of promise, that common history would likewise be written on them and so it is apparent that there was no time in the history of Joseph's later descendants when it was not necessary for some of them to familiarize themselves with the Egyptian characters and system of writing in which the beginning of their history was obviously written by Joseph himself, or was done by his direction, unless those sacred records were to be set aside as curiosities when that Patriarch and his sons passed from earth, or when the last one of his descendants who did understand the Egyptian had gone down to the grave.

Some will doubtless contend that the writer has assumed too much in the foregoing remarks, when claiming that Joseph would not fail to make a record of his Divine calling and blessings, and of the Lord's further communications to him in respect thereto, or touching other matters as the case might be, and that the record would naturally be written in Egyptian. But it should be sufficient, in order to meet this contention, to remind these objectors that what has thus been assumed was far more likely to eventuate than that Joseph would *not* make a record of the glorious blessings and prophecies which were pronounced upon his own head and those of his sons by Jacob, or that the Lord would *not* give further communications to Joseph respecting the future of his

family or descendants, and the mighty work they were to accomplish, or that the record would *not* be kept in Egyptian. With the probabilities in the case standing so largely in favor of the position assumed in these remarks, the matter might well be allowed to rest without further argument, but a few additional thoughts shall be offered, and those first at hand are in the way of an illustration. Let us therefore suppose that an American had gone in his youthful days to France to live there during the remaining period of his natural life, and that not many years after his arrival there, he was elevated to one of the highest offices of state in the gift of the people, and this position was to be retained by him for scores of years for aught he knew to the contrary. What need is there to argue that one of his first duties would be to learn the French language in order that he might readily and properly conduct all state business which came before him as a French official? Suppose that when this American had arrived at man's estate he was married to a French lady of a high class, and that later two sons, who early in life became famous, were born into this family. Some years later quite a large number of prominent Americans also go to France, and in course of time the leader of this company informs the American official of state in France that he, (the latter) has been selected and commissioned by the God of the universe to stand at the head of a great branch of American people from whom there should be raised up and established at some future time, in far distant lands, a mighty American community, and so numerous should the people become there that they should be spoken of as a multitude of nations.

If we grant that the man thus selected for such high honors had full confidence that his calling was indeed from the Almighty, can we suppose that he would not make a record of his warrant to stand at the head of such a glorious, nation-building movement? Can we suppose that he would not ask for counsel from the Lord in regard to the duties of his new and exalted position, and asking, is it possible that his petitions would be unanswered? And as an American who loved the institutions of his native land almost beyond the power of expression, would he fail, think you, to make provision that a copy of the American constitution and many of the American laws, should be taken along with other things by those of his descendants who were to found American nations in distant lands? How could they possibly establish American communities without these necessary aids? and would he not also provide that every scrap of glorious American history should also be taken along that it might serve as an inspiration to the far away communities of Americans? and finally would not this American, living in France, and familiar with the French language, and who had had no occasion to use English speech for years, write the record in French for the especial benefit of his French wife and French speaking children and perhaps grandchildren as well?

The illustration is now left in the hands of the reader for himself to apply, as it shall seem befitting or not, in the case of Joseph and his affairs, and reference to this Patriarch and to matters which concern him in person, are concluded with the observation that since his blessings and those of his sons were considered of sufficient importance

to be recorded by Moses in the Pentateuch, but who did not begin the work of delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage for about two hundred years after Joseph and his sons were blessed by Jacob, and it was still after these centuries had passed away when the Pentateuch was written by Moses, is it going too far to claim that, as the principals were far more interested than Moses possibly could be, in having their blessings recorded, the recording was done by Joseph or by his orders? And, what is more, we are now in a position to see that for more than two hundred years before Moses began writing sacred records, if there was at all any systematic effort made by way of preserving the word of the Lord in written form, it was manifestly undertaken and carried out by Joseph and other famous members of his family, and, as a natural inference, written in Egyptian, and likely from this record what Moses later had to say about Joseph's blessings and those of his sons was copied. This view is not a mere fancy of the writer's mind, for there have been capable advocates of the opinion that Moses, when preparing the Pentateuch, did have access to documents of an earlier date than his own times. Who among the whole list of ancient patriarchs was better fitted by natural endowments, by the material advantages of his exalted position as a mighty ruler in Egypt, and by the gracious favor of the Almighty than Joseph was to be the author of some of those sacred writings which Moses very probably consulted when preparing the first five books of the Bible? See *Bible Hand-Book* by Dr. Angus, page 434, par. 10.

(To be concluded.)