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A Book That Does Not Wear Out

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Now behold, it came to pass that I, Jacob, having ministered much unto my people in word, (and I cannot write but a little of my words, because of the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates) and we know that the things which we write upon plates must remain; But whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates must perish and vanish away; but we can write a few words upon plates, which will give our children, and also our beloved brethren, a small degree of knowledge concerning us, or concerning their fathers—Now in this thing we do rejoice; and we labor diligently to engraven these words upon plates, hoping that our beloved brethren and our children will receive them with thankful hearts, and look upon them that they may learn with joy and not with sorrow, neither with contempt, concerning their first parents. (Jacob 4:1–3)

The men whose writings came to be included in the Book of Mormon were very concerned that their records be preserved. Nephi recorded that “the Lord God promised unto me that these things which I write shall be kept and preserved, and handed down unto my seed, from generation to generation”

(2 Nephi 25:21), and Jacob wrote that Nephi told him to “preserve these plates and hand them down unto my seed, from generation to generation” (Jacob 1:3). Enos prayed “that the Lord God would preserve a record of my people, the Nephites; even if it so be by the power of his holy arm, that it might be brought forth at some future day unto the Lamanites. . . . I cried unto him continually . . . that he would preserve the records; and he covenanted with me that he would bring them forth unto the Lamanites in his own due time” (Enos 1:13, 15–16).

King Benjamin also spoke of preserving the plates (see Mosiah 1:4–5), and King Mosiah “took the plates of brass, and all the things which he had kept, and conferred them upon Alma [the younger] . . . and commanded him that he should keep and preserve them, and also keep a record of the people, handing them down from one generation to another” (Mosiah 28:20; see 28:11). Alma, in turn, handed the plates over to his son Helaman, commanding him to “keep them . . . and that ye preserve these interpreters” (Alma 37:21; see 37:8–12, 18–19).

Mormon wrote of the plates, “And they were handed down from king Benjamin, from generation to generation until they have fallen into my hands. And I, Mormon, pray to God that they may be preserved from this time henceforth. And I know that they will be preserved; for there are great things written upon them” (Words of Mormon 1:11). When Moroni delivered his father’s abridgment to Joseph Smith in 1827, he told him “that if [he] would use all [his] endeavors to preserve them, until he, the messenger, should call for them, they should be protected” (JS—H 1:59).

Earlier chapters noted that the Nephites preserved their records by keeping them from the hands of the wicked, often by hiding them. Another method of preservation was the writ-

ing medium itself—metal plates that were less likely to deteriorate over time.

Alma, describing the plates containing the sacred Nephite records, told his son Helaman, “Behold, it has been prophesied by our fathers, that they should be kept and handed down from one generation to another, and be kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord until they should go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. . . . And now behold, if they are kept they must retain their brightness; yea, and they will retain their brightness; yea, and also shall all the plates which do contain that which is holy writ” (Alma 37:4–5).

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q536) speaks of “writ[ing] the words of God in a book which does not wear out.”¹ In the *Cologne Mani Codex*, an angel told Adam to “take and write these things which I reveal to you on most pure papyrus, incorruptible and insusceptible to worms.”² In the fifth-century-A.D. Gnostic Christian Nag Hammadi text known as VI,6 *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, Hermes told his son that the praise he sang to God should “be written in this imperishable book” (60.13–16).³

The indestructible nature of sacred records is reflected in the story of Brik-Yawar, an early copyist of the Mandaean book *Alma Rišaia Rba*. When Brik-Yawar received the scroll, he was afraid: “I took it and cast it into the water but the water did not accept it. Twice I threw it into the fire but the fire did not accept it.”⁴ When Shaq-Ziwa-Rba later received the document, he wrapped it until he arrived at his sanctuary. Opening the document (called “the treasure”), he discovered that it was “in the handwriting of the Lord-of-Greatness.”⁵

One way of preserving texts written on perishable materials was to treat them with oil. Thus in an early Jewish text, the *Testament of Moses* 1:16–18, Moses instructed Joshua to preserve

the books (parchments) he was leaving in his charge by anointing them with cedar (oil?) and depositing them in earthen jars until the day of recompense.⁶ Similarly, the Roman writers Hemina and Pliny (see *Naturalis historia* 13.27.84–86) noted that the books of King Numa had been preserved by being treated with citrus oil and then buried in a stone coffin. A few centuries later, when the coffins containing the books and Numa's body were discovered, the corpse had decayed but the books were still in good condition.⁷

In the Greek *Kore Kosmou* 8, Hermes hid his books and addressed them, “Ye holy books, which have been written by my imperishable hands, and have been anointed with the drug of imperishability by me who am master over you, remain ye undecaying through all ages, and be ye unseen and undiscovered by all men who shall go to and fro on the plains of this land, until the time when Heaven, grown old, shall beget organisms worthy of you.”⁸

Writing on Metallic Plates

In the Book of Mormon, records were frequently kept on metallic plates. This was done not only with Mormon's abridgment,⁹ but also with the small and large plates of Nephi,¹⁰ the brass plates obtained from Laban,¹¹ the records kept by the people of Limhi (see Mosiah 8:5), and Ether's twenty-four gold plates comprising the Jaredite history.¹²

One of the authors of the Book of Mormon, Jacob (son of Lehi), explained why the Nephites kept their secret records on metallic plates: “I cannot write but a little of my words, because of the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates,” he declared, but “we know that the things which we write upon plates must remain” (Jacob 4:1). The durability of metal plates was also known in ancient Turkey. At the dedication or renovation of a house or temple, the Hittites deposited a piece of

copper in the foundations and recited, “As this copper is firm and sound, so may the house (temple) be firm and sound.”¹³ The durability of metal records is also noted in the Falasha version of *5 Baruch*,¹⁴ in which an angel accompanied Baruch on a tour of the heavenly Jerusalem:

Then the angel took me to the east and showed me a golden column on which was engraved an inscription in a thin writing (brighter) than the sun, the moon, and the stars of the sky. I asked him: “What is this golden column and what is this writing on it (that has) the likeness of the sun, the moon, and the shining stars?” He answered me: “The names of the just are written for eternal life on this golden column, where they wax not old or corrupt.” I said to him: “Are the names alone engraved upon it; are not the features of the face engraved upon it, too?” He answered and said: “All the features of the faces of the just are engraved for [eternal] life on this golden column, where they neither wax old nor become corrupt. They are engraved with a golden pen; the deeds of the sinners (are engraved) with an iron pen.”¹⁵

A prominent late-nineteenth-century critic of the Book of Mormon wrote, “No such records were ever engraved upon golden plates, or any other plates, in the early ages.”¹⁶ Had he known Hebrew, he would have known that Isaiah 8:1 speaks of writing on a polished metal plate with an engraving tool; the terms are mistranslated “roll” and “pen” in the King James Bible. The critic also seems to have been unaware of the fact that the Apocrypha, which was included in about half the King James Bibles in the early nineteenth century, notes that a treaty between the Jews and the Romans in the second century B.C. was inscribed on bronze plates (see 1 Maccabees 8:22).

Other early texts speak of documents written on metallic plates. The *Cologne Mani Codex* says that an angel had appeared to Sethel (biblical Seth), son of Adam and told him secrets that

he was to “write upon bronze tablets and store them up in the desert land.”¹⁷ A similar story is told in the *Apocalypse of Enosh*, cited in the *Cologne Mani Codex*. The angel instructed Seth’s son Enosh (Enos in the King James Bible) to write “hidden things upon bronze tablets and deposit (them) in the wilderness.” Enosh left these tablets “behind for the subsequent generations.”¹⁸

Arab traditions also speak of documents written on metallic plates. The eleventh-century historian al-Tha‘labi wrote of a book sent to David from heaven. The book was sealed with gold and contained thirteen questions to be asked Solomon.¹⁹ Al-Tha‘labi also mentioned gold tablets containing the history of a vanished empire. These tablets were found in a cave in the Hadramaut region of southern Arabia.²⁰ Writing about A.D. 1226, the Arab writer Idrîsî noted a treasure-hunting expedition of a few years before in which a group of Arabs dug into the pyramid of Mycerinus at Giza, Egypt. After six months of hard labor, they found the decayed remains of a man with some golden tablets inscribed in a language none of them understood. The tablets were taken for their gold content, suggesting that they were probably melted down.²¹

Ancient inscribed plates of gold, silver, copper, and lead have been found in such diverse places as China, Java (an Indonesian island), Thailand, India, Pakistan, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Morocco, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, Crete, and Korea. A list of sixty-two such discoveries was compiled by Franklin S. Harris Jr. and published in 1957.²²

The *Elder Edda*, an Old Norse text, contains a prophetic utterance known as the *Völuspá*. In this text, the *Aesir* (gods) met “on Ida’s plain, and of the mighty earth-encircler speak, and there to memory call their mighty deeds, and the supreme

god's ancient lore. There shall again the wondrous golden tablets in the grass be found, which in days of old had possessed the ruler of the gods, and Fiölnir's race."²³

Summary

The concept of preparing records that will last through many centuries, making them available to later generations, is ancient. Records written on clay (a common practice in what today constitutes the nations of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey) were sometimes baked to make them last longer and were occasionally kept in containers. Documents written on papyrus and parchment, which are considerably more perishable than clay, were often preserved in pottery jars or in tombs. Another method the ancients used to preserve documents was calling on divine guardians to keep the records safe.

Writing on metallic plates was yet another way to ensure the durability of records. Many of the metallic records discovered to date have been found in foundation deposits, often in stone boxes, as was the Book of Mormon. These include records left behind by Sumerian, Hittite, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian kings, as well as foundation deposits from other parts of the Near East and from Asia. Some of these are discussed in chapter 3, "Hiding Records in Boxes."²⁴

Of all the metals, gold is the one least likely to decay over time. It does not oxidize like iron, silver, copper, or its alloys (bronze and brass), and it does not wear down like lead. Because it is a softer metal, it is easier to engrave, yet unlike lead, which is softer still, it does not readily lose its shape. Consequently, the most durable records would have been written on gold or gold alloy plates and hidden away in stone boxes, which are less likely to degrade than pottery.

Notes

1. Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 264.
2. P. Colon. inv. nr. 4780, 49–50, in Ron Cameron and Arthur J. Dewey, *The Cologne Mani Codex* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 39.
3. James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 325.
4. *Alma Rišaiā Rba* 651–54, in E. S. Drower, *A Pair of Nasoraean Commentaries (Two Priestly Documents)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963), 52.
5. *Alma Rišaiā Rba* 251–57, in *ibid.*, 72. The first-century-A.D. Jewish philosopher Philo, referring to “the Book of the Generation of the Real Man” in Genesis 5:1, notes that good men are not remembered by records in papers that can be destroyed by bookworms, but by the immortal book in which his virtuous actions are recorded (see *De Abrahamo* 11).
6. See James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:927.
7. For further details, see chapter 3 of this volume, “Hiding Records in Boxes.”
8. Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala, Sweden: University of Uppsala, 1950), 82, where he includes the Greek text in a note.
9. See 3 Nephi 5:11; Mormon 2:18; 6:6; 8:5, 14; 9:33; Ether 4:4; 5:2.
10. See 1 Nephi 1:17; 6:1, 3, 6; 9:1–5; 10:1; 19:1–6; 2 Nephi 4:14; 5:4, 29–33; Jacob 1:1–4; 3:13–14; 4:1–3; 7:26–27; Jarom 1:2, 14–15; Omni 1:1, 3, 8, 11, 14, 18, 25, 30; Words of Mormon 1:3–6, 9–10; Mosiah 1:6, 16; 28:11; Alma 37:2; 44:24; 3 Nephi 5:10; 26:7, 11; 4 Nephi 1:19, 21; Mormon 1:4; 2:17–18; 6:6.
11. See 1 Nephi 3:3, 12, 24; 4:16, 24, 38; 5:10, 14, 18–19; 13:23; 19:21–22; 22:1, 30; 2 Nephi 4:2, 15; 5:12; Mosiah 1:3–4, 16; 10:16; 28:11, 20; Alma 37:3; 3 Nephi 1:2; 10:17.

12. See Mosiah 8:9, 11, 19; 21:27; 28:11; Alma 37:21; Ether 1:2, 4, and the preface to Ether.

13. Theodor H. Gaster, in his revision of James Frazer, *The New Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 171. The concept of the burial of metallic records in palace and temple foundations is discussed in chapter 3 of this volume, “Hiding Records in Boxes.”

14. The Falasha, the so-called “black Jews” of Ethiopia, borrowed the sacred book from their Christian neighbors, who have also preserved it.

15. Wolf Leslau, *Falasha Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 68.

16. Martin Thomas Lamb, *The Golden Bible: Or, the Book of Mormon. Is It From God?* (New York: Ward and Drummond, 1887), 11.

17. P. Colon. inv. nr. 4780, 50–52, in Cameron and Dewey, *Cologne Mani Codex*, 39–43.

18. John C. Reeves, *Heralds of That Good Realm: Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 142.

19. See al-Thaʿlabi, *Qiṣaṣ ʿal-ʿAnbiyaʿ* (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi wa-Awladuhu, A. H., 1340), 202.

20. See *ibid.*, 102. Hugh Nibley was the first to bring this information to the attention of Latter-day Saints. I am grateful to Brian Hauglid for confirming details of the story from the Arabic text.

21. The story is reported in Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1960), 15 n. 5.

22. See Franklin S. Harris Jr., “Others Kept Records on Metal Plates, Too,” *Instructor*, October 1957, 318–21. The list was later reprinted in a pamphlet entitled “Gold Plates Used Anciently” (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1963); and in Mark E. Petersen, *Those Gold Plates!* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 4–5. See also Paul R. Cheesman, *Ancient Writing on Metal Plates* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1985); and his “Ancient Writing on Metal Plates,” *Ensign*, October 1979, 42–47. For a survey

of ancient writings on metallic plates with extensive bibliography, see H. Curtis Wright, "Metallic Documents of Antiquity," *BYU Studies* 10/4 (1970): 457–77.

23. Benjamin Thorpe, trans., *The Elder Edda of Saemund Sigfusson*, published with I. A. Blackwell, trans., *The Younger Edda of Snorre Sturleson* (London: Norroena Society, 1907), 8.

24. To date, the definitive article on the subject is H. Curtis Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes," in *By Study and Also By Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990). Wright is currently preparing an exhaustive bibliography of writings on metal plates.