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Speech from the Dust

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Speech from the Dust

He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. . . . Also, that there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted “seers” in ancient or former times; and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book. (Joseph Smith—History [JS—H] 1:34–35)

With these words Joseph Smith introduced to the world the concept of a sacred history, written in ancient times on metallic plates and hidden away to be revealed in the last days. The existence of the records comprising the Book of Mormon was revealed to him by the resurrected Moroni, the last in a line of prophetic Nephite scribes.

“While he was conversing with me about the plates,” Joseph later recorded, “the vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited, and that

so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it” (JS—H 1:42). Joseph’s visit was not long in coming; he went the next morning. It was a hill later to be called Cumorah, near Manchester in Ontario County, New York.

On the west side of this hill, not far from the top, under a stone of considerable size, lay the plates, deposited in a stone box. This stone was thick and rounding in the middle on the upper side, and thinner towards the edges, so that the middle part of it was visible above the ground, but the edge all around was covered with earth. Having removed the earth, I obtained a lever, which I got fixed under the edge of the stone, and with a little exertion raised it up. I looked in, and there indeed did I behold the plates, the urim and thummim, and the breastplate, as stated by the messenger. The box in which they lay was formed by laying stones together in some kind of cement. In the bottom of the box were laid two stones crossways of the box, and on these stones lay the plates and the other things with them. (JS—H 1:51–52)

Joseph attempted to remove the plates from the box but was forbidden by the messenger, who told him to return for instruction at the same time each year for the next four years. During his last visit, on 22 September 1827, Joseph took custody of the plates (see JS—H 1:53–54, 59). Using the translation devices provided by the Lord, he produced the Book of Mormon, which was first published in 1830. It was “the book to be revealed” (D&C 128:20).

We presume that it was Moroni who hid the plates in the New York hill, though this is never explicitly stated in the scriptures or by Joseph Smith. During his time as scribal custodian of the Nephite records, Moroni indicated that he would “hide up” the plates (Mormon 8:4, 14).

Hiding Records in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon practice of hiding records in the earth for safekeeping did not begin with the Nephites. Years before the Nephites hid up their records, the Lord told the brother of Jared to “seal up” the record he was writing with two stones prepared for its future translation (see Ether 3:22–24, 27–28; 4:1–5). When Ether, the last of the Jaredite prophets, “finished his record . . . he hid them in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33). After its discovery by a group of Nephite explorers, the record was translated by a prophet using special stones the Lord prepared for that purpose, in the same manner that Joseph Smith translated the Nephite record (see Mosiah 8: 9–12; 28:11–19).

Just as Ether hid the Jaredite record in the final years before his people’s destruction, so, too, did Ammaron conceal the Nephite record in that nation’s last years. Nephi₁ foresaw this a thousand years before it happened (see 1 Nephi 13:35). In “the three hundred and twentieth year from the coming of Christ,” Ammaron, “being constrained by the Holy Ghost, did hide up the records which were sacred—yea, even all the sacred records which had been handed down from generation to generation . . . And he did hide them up unto the Lord, that they might come again unto the remnant of the house of Jacob, according to the prophecies and the promises of the Lord” (4 Nephi 1:48–49).

After hiding up the records, Ammaron went to ten-year-old Mormon, “a sober child, and . . . quick to observe,” and charged him that, when he was about twenty-four years of age, he should go to the hill Shim, where Ammaron had “deposited . . . all the sacred engravings concerning this people” (Mormon 1:2–3). At that time he should retrieve the plates of Nephi, leaving the rest, and make a record of the events of his time

(see Mormon 1:4). At the appointed time, “seeing that the Lamanites were about to overthrow the land, [Mormon] did go to the hill Shim, and did take up all the records which Ammaron had hid up unto the Lord” (Mormon 4:23). Several decades later, the records were again in danger of being taken by the Lamanites:

And it came to pass that when we had gathered in all our people in one to the land of Cumorah, behold I, Mormon, began to be old; and knowing it to be the last struggle of my people, and having been commanded of the Lord that I should not suffer the records which had been handed down by our fathers, which were sacred, to fall into the hands of the Lamanites, (for the Lamanites would destroy them) therefore I made this [abridged] record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni. (Mormon 6:6; see also Ether 15:11)

After hiding up the bulk of the Nephite records in the hill Cumorah, Mormon turned his abridgment over to his son, Moroni, to complete. Moroni ultimately hid the abridgment plates as well, though he never mentioned where:¹

And I am the same who hideth up this record unto the Lord; the plates thereof are of no worth, because of the commandment of the Lord. For he truly saith that no one shall have them to get gain; but the record thereof is of great worth; and whoso shall *bring it to light*, him will the Lord bless. For none can have power to *bring it to light* save it be given him of God; for God wills that it shall be done with an eye single to his glory, or the welfare of the ancient and long dispersed covenant people of the Lord. And blessed be he that shall *bring this thing to light*; for it shall be *brought out of darkness unto light*,² according to the word of God; yea, it shall be

*brought out of the earth, and it shall shine forth out of darkness, and come unto the knowledge of the people; and it shall be done by the power of God. (Mormon 8:14–16)*³

Following his work with the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith was instrumental in bringing to light other ancient works of scripture, including part of a revelation written by John the apostle (D&C 7), lost writings of Moses and Enoch (Moses 1, 6–7; D&C 107:40–57), and the Book of Abraham. He also restored some missing portions of the Bible, such as Joseph Smith—Matthew in the Pearl of Great Price, D&C 45, and portions of the Joseph Smith Translation.⁴ The Lord also encouraged Oliver Cowdery to look into “all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred” (D&C 8:11).

Hiding Records in the Ancient Near East

Joseph Smith’s work marked the beginning of an era in which ancient records would be rediscovered in such vast quantities that our knowledge about the ancient Near East would greatly multiply in just a few generations. The discovery of records hidden in the Near East has made headline news in our time. Most notable is the large cache of documents known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which began coming to light in 1947. Other hidden documents have been found elsewhere in Israel, Egypt, Iraq, and Iran. Moreover, some Near Eastern peoples, such as the Mandaeans and the Yezîdîs, continue to hide their sacred records in boxes placed in the ground and in caves.

The Book of Mormon as a Hidden Book

In this book, we shall demonstrate that various elements of the Book of Mormon story have antecedents in the ancient world that were not known to Joseph Smith or his contemporaries. Among these are the concept of writing and hiding

books in such a way that they could be discovered by future generations; the use of special containers, such as stone boxes, in which to hide records; and hiding the books in mountains. We shall also see that ancient and medieval people commonly believed that sacred books were entrusted to the care of angels, who would deliver them to mankind at the appropriate time. Analogously, the angel Moroni delivered the plates of the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith.

Some critics will see this volume as additional “proof” of their contention that Joseph Smith simply made up the story of the Book of Mormon from information available to him. Consequently, I hasten to add that most of the documents cited herein were not discovered until long after the publication of the Book of Mormon and that the likelihood that any of the traditions were known to Joseph Smith, a New England farmboy, is virtually nil. The research that produced this volume took several years and the expertise of a number of qualified scholars. It is thus inconceivable that Joseph Smith, with his minimal education, could have invented a story with the same elements by the age of twenty-four, when he published his English translation of the Book of Mormon.

Notes

1. Many LDS scholars maintain that the hill we call Cumorah in New York state is not the hill of that name known from the Book of Mormon, which is possibly situated in southern Mexico. This conclusion is based principally on the internal geography of the Nephite record, which suggests that the hill in which Mormon buried the plates was near the narrow neck of land. From the Book of Mormon description, the narrow neck could not have been in the northeastern United States. Still, no one doubts that Moroni hid the abridgment plates in a stone box in the New York hill, where he directed Joseph Smith to find them. Moroni buried the plates sometime after

A.D. 420, some thirty-five years or more after the great battle at the hill Cumorah (compare Mormon 6:5; Moroni 9:1), giving him plenty of time to travel a great distance from his homeland. It is significant that inside that box Joseph found only the abridgment plates and other sacred relics, but not the whole of the Nephite library (see JS—H 1:52–53).

2. The wording reminds us of Job 28:11: “He bindeth the floods from overflowing; and *the thing that is hid bringeth he forth to light*” (emphasis added).

3. The concept of “bringing to light . . . those parts of my scriptures which have been hidden because of iniquity” is also found in D&C 6:27. Records of evil deeds will also be brought to light, for the books—including the Book of Mormon—will be opened at the judgment (see Daniel 7:9–14; Revelation 20:12; 2 Nephi 29:11; 33:10–15; Alma 37:23–25; 3 Nephi 27:25–26; Moroni 10:27–29; D&C 127:7; 128:6–8; 2 Baruch 24:1; 1 Enoch 47:3; 90:20–24; 2 Enoch 36:3 [A]; 52:15; 3 Enoch 27:1–2; 28:7; 30:2; 32:1; 4 Ezra 6:20; Jubilees 10:17; Qur’an 69:14–23; 81:11–14; 83:8–29). Compare Nephi’s statement that “there is nothing which is secret save it shall be revealed; there is no work of darkness save it shall be made *manifest in the light*; and there is nothing which is *sealed upon the earth* save it shall be loosed” (2 Nephi 30:17).

4. See D&C 45:15–16, 60. Also, it roughly parallels Matthew 24 but agrees more with the Luke account.