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Sealed Books

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chapter 4
Sealed Books

Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites—Written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile—Written by way of commandment, and also by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation—Written and sealed up, and hid up unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed—To come forth by the gift and power of God unto the interpretation thereof—Sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile—The interpretation thereof by the gift of God. (Title Page of the Book of Mormon)

The scriptures and other ancient texts occasionally speak of “sealed” books. The term is used to denote two different things. Sometimes it refers to a book that has somehow been sealed shut, such as by sewing or by applying an impressed wax or clay seal. In other cases, the word “sealed” means “hidden,” referring to a book that is secreted in a hiding place.

Isaiah 29:11–14 speaks of “the words of a book that is sealed.” This book cannot be read by the learned but is delivered

to the unlearned to read. Though Isaiah seems to have been referring to Jerusalem and its inhabitants,¹ Nephi, in his typical fashion of likening Isaiah's words to his own people (see 1 Nephi 19:23–24; 22:8; 2 Nephi 6:5; 11:2, 8), paraphrased this portion of Isaiah in 2 Nephi 27:6–26 and used it as a prophecy of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. “The Lord God,” he declared, “shall bring forth unto you the words of a book, and they shall be the words of them which have slumbered. And the book shall be sealed” (2 Nephi 27:6–7; see 26:16–17; 27:8–9, 10–11, 13, 15, 17). Nephi detailed the coming forth of the Nephite record, along with the role of the three witnesses and the incident involving Professor Charles Anthon (see 2 Nephi 27:9–26; JS—H 1:64–65).²

Nephi noted that “the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world” and “be sealed” by the power of God to come forth in “the own due time of the Lord” (2 Nephi 27:7, 10, 12; see 27:8, 11, 15, 17, 21). In the Lord's name, Nephi further instructed the future translator that after completing his work, he should “seal up the book again, and hide it up unto me, that I may preserve the words which thou hast not read, until I shall see fit in mine own wisdom to reveal all things unto the children of men” (2 Nephi 27:22; compare 30:3). The terms “seal up” and “hide up” seem to mean the same thing. This is clear from other Book of Mormon passages. For example, the Lord instructed the brother of Jared to write an account of his people and “seal them up, that no one can interpret them; for ye shall write them in a language that they cannot be read” (Ether 3:22; see 3:27). Furthermore, Jared was to take the two interpreter stones and “seal them up also with the things which ye shall write” (Ether 3:23). Sealing up the records made it possible for the Lord to “show them in mine own due time unto the children of men” (Ether 3:24, 27–28).

After abridging the account of the Jaredite record, Moroni noted that the Lord “commanded me that I should seal them [the plates of Ether] up; and he also hath commanded that I should seal up the interpretation thereof; wherefore I have sealed up the interpreters, according to the commandment of the Lord,” that they might come forth at a later time (Ether 4:5–6). This parallels the passage in which Moroni said, “I am commanded that I should hide them up again in the earth” (Ether 4:3). The fact that the interpreters were likewise sealed suggests that sealing up is the same as hiding (see Ether 3:24, 28; 4:6).

Near the end of his own record, Moroni noted, “And I seal up these records,” obviously referring to the abridgment that Joseph Smith translated (Moroni 10:2). Indeed, the title page of the Book of Mormon indicates that the plates containing the record were “written and sealed up, and hid up unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed—To come forth by the gift and power of God unto the interpretation thereof—Sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile—The interpretation thereof by the gift of God.”

Of special interest in this passage is the notation that the record was hidden up “unto the Lord.” Ammaron hid up the records “unto the Lord,” as did Mormon (Mormon 1:2; see 1:3; 4:23; 5:12; Ether 15:11). Evidently, Nephites commonly hid up their precious things to the Lord (see Helaman 12:18; 13:18–20, 35; Mormon 1:18; compare Job 3:21; Matthew 25:18, 24–25).

The parallel to sealing or hiding records up to the Lord is for an individual to be sealed unto life eternal. Joseph Smith told William Clayton, “Your life is hid with Christ in God, and so are many others. Nothing but the unpardonable sin can

prevent you from inheriting eternal life for you are sealed up by the power of the Priesthood unto eternal life, having taken the step necessary for that purpose.”³ This is the sealing by the Holy Spirit of promise that is mentioned in the scriptures (see Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Revelation 7:3; D&C 76:53; 124:124; 131:5; 132:7, 18–19, 26). It preserves an individual to come forth in the day of the Lord, on the morning of the first resurrection. In like manner, scriptures sealed or hidden up to the Lord are “to come forth . . . in the own due time of the Lord” (1 Nephi 14:26; see 2 Nephi 26:17; 30:17). And, like the sealing up of individuals to eternal life, the revelation of the sealed records comes through the keys of the priesthood (see D&C 28:7; 35:18).⁴

That sealing refers to hiding is also suggested in *Testament of Adam* 3:6, where Seth declared, “We sealed the testament and we put it in the cave of treasures.”⁵ Eusebius, in his *Praeparatio evangelica* 9, cited a passage from Artapanus to the effect that Moses “wrote the name [of God] on a tablet and sealed it.”⁶

Other Sealed Books

The scriptures speak of other sealed books to come forth in the last days. One of these comes from Daniel. An angel told Daniel, “But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end” (Daniel 12:4). “And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end” (Daniel 12:9). The angel further spoke of the time “to seal up the vision and the prophecy” (Daniel 9:24).

Nephi was permitted to see the same vision given to the apostle John, as recorded in the book of Revelation, but allowed to write only part of what he saw. The Lord instructed

Nephi, “But the things which thou shalt see hereafter thou shalt not write; for the Lord God hath ordained the apostle of the Lamb of God that he should write them. And also others who have been, to them hath he shown all things, and they have written them; and they are sealed up to come forth in their purity, according to the truth which is in the Lamb, in the own due time of the Lord, unto the house of Israel” (1 Nephi 14:25–26). The sealing of John’s record is mentioned in Revelation 10:4: “I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not.” John was subsequently commanded, “Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand” (Revelation 22:10). Apparently, the sealed portion of John’s revelation consisted of things he saw but did not write, while the things he actually wrote were not sealed.

In his revelation, John saw a heavenly “book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals” that only Christ, the Lamb, was worthy to loose (Revelation 5:1; see 5:2, 5–9). Each seal represented a period of time in the earth’s history (see D&C 77:6–7), and as the Lamb opened each seal, a different vision was unfolded (see Revelation 6:3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1). Some scholars have identified the sealed book of Revelation with the Mesopotamian tablets of destiny that denoted kingship among both the gods and mortals.⁷ It would thus be a symbol of Christ’s rule. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q550), thought by some scholars to be the prototype from which the book of Esther was composed, is similarly described. The fragmentary text speaks of the Persian king whose name is missing and says that “the books of his father were to be read in front of him; and among the books was found a scroll [sealed with]

seven seals of the ring of Darius, his father.”⁸ Like the tablets of destiny, the text then goes on to establish who should rule the Persian empire.

The heavenly book whose seals only Christ could open is reflected in an Ethiopic document called *Lefafa Sedek* (Bandlet of Righteousness), which purports to be the heavenly book in question: “And then all his [i.e., Michael’s] angels gathered themselves together that they might have that Book read [to them] by Christ, the Son of God. Now that Book had been sealed with the Seal of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Ghost, and no one had the power [or was authorized] to open that book, except the Four-and-Twenty Priests of heaven, and the Four Evangelists.⁹ And the Four Evangelists took that Book, and they opened the seal thereof, and they looked therein, and they read it out aloud so that [the angels] might hear.”¹⁰

The medieval Jewish *Zohar* Genesis 55b says that “when Adam was in the Garden of Eden, God sent down to him a book by the hand of Raziel, the angel in charge of the holy mysteries. . . . In the middle of the book was a secret writing explaining the thousand and five hundred keys which were not revealed even to the holy angels, and all of which were locked up in this book until it came into the hands of Adam.”¹¹ The word rendered “mysteries” in this passage is *raz*, the first element in the name of the angel Raziel, and *Raziel* means “secrets of God.”

In Mandaean lore, a letter sealed by God is sent from heaven to the soul of a righteous person, who must wear it around the neck when sent to the Gate of Life at death.¹² Similarly, the ancient Egyptians placed letters of recommendation to various gods in the coffin with their dead. These letters were typically folded and tied around the middle with a fiber thread.¹³ In at least one instance (see Papyrus Rhind II), the god

Thoth is depicted holding the letter in his right hand, which is stretched out toward Osiris, the god of the dead, while his left hand grasps the hand of the deceased, whom he is leading toward Osiris.¹⁴ The Christian *Hymn of the Soul* or *Hymn of the Pearl*, a parable of the plan of salvation incorporated into the *Acts of Thomas*, also speaks of a sealed letter sent from the king (meaning God) to one of his sons who had come to the earth, which is symbolized by Egypt.¹⁵ The eleventh-century Arab chronographer al-Tha'labi told of a book sealed with gold that was sent to King David from heaven. The book contained thirteen questions to be put to Solomon.¹⁶ A sealed letter from heaven is also mentioned in *Odes of Solomon* 23:

And his thought was like a letter, and his will descended from on high. And it was sent from a bow like an arrow that has been forcibly shot. And many hands rushed to the letter, in order to catch (it), then take and read it. But it escaped from their fingers; and they were afraid of it and of the seal which was upon it. Because they were not allowed to loosen its seal; for the power which was over the seal was better than they. But those who saw the letter went after it; that they might know where it would land, and who should read it, and who should hear it. . . . The letter was one of command. . . . And the letter became a large volume, which was entirely written by the finger of God.¹⁷

Sealed and Open Records

The heavenly book with the seven seals seen by John obviously was not merely hidden away, but actually sealed to be opened at a later time. In the Bible are examples of sealing documents with the king's ring or seal (see 1 Kings 21:8; Esther 3:12; 8:8, 10; Daniel 6:17; compare Job 14:17). The ancient Mesopotamians made two copies of legal documents, such as

contracts, one open for public consultation and the other sealed to prevent tampering with the official record. Often, one text, written on a plain clay tablet, was sealed inside the other, written on a hollow clay “envelope,” and a seal was rolled over the text on the envelope. A damaged seal was considered to be evidence that the document had been tampered with. Most private archives consisted of these doubled, sealed documents.

The practice of preparing two copies, one sealed and one open, is also known from ancient Israel, as described in the Bible and other early Jewish texts. For example, in *Jasher* 27:12–14 we read that Jacob’s purchase of the birthright in exchange for the pottage was formally documented: “And Jacob wrote the whole of this in a book, and he testified the same with witnesses, and he sealed it, and the book remained in the hands of Jacob.”¹⁸ Later, after returning from Syria, Jacob wrote a book of purchase for the property agreement he had struck with Esau after Isaac died.¹⁹ He put it with “the command and the statutes and the revealed book, and he placed them in an earthen vessel in order that they should remain for a long time, and he delivered them into the hands of his children” (*Jasher* 47:29).²⁰ When Esau’s family later challenged the right of Jacob’s sons to bury their father in the cave, the Israelites produced “all the records; the record of the purchase, the sealed record and the open record, and also all the first records in which all the transactions of the birth-right are written” (*Jasher* 56:57;²¹ the story is also found in TB *Soṭah* 13a, *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* 39, and Rashi on Genesis 49:21).

The contrast between sealed and open purchase records intended to be preserved is also made in Jeremiah 32, from which the *Jasher* account may have borrowed. Jeremiah’s cousin Hanameel asked him to purchase a field,²² and Jeremiah drew up “the evidence of the purchase” and “sealed it” after having

witnesses sign the document. He then instructed his scribe, Baruch, “Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days.” The prophet used this event to prophesy that the people of Judah would, after their captivity in Babylon, return to possess their lands once again (see Jeremiah 32:8–15, 44; compare 13:3–11; 19:1, 10–11).

Another ancient text that mentions both sealed and public, or revealed, documents is the *Damascus Document* (CD V, 2–5), copies of which were discovered in both the genizah of the Old Cairo synagogue in Egypt and among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Damascus Document* notes that the “sealed book of the law” was kept in the ark, while the public copy was stored elsewhere.²³ Ben Zion Wacholder, who discusses this aspect of the document at length,²⁴ notes that “the ‘sealing’ may refer to the contents of the document, to the document itself, or to its mode of storage.” He concludes that the fact that the sealed document was kept in the ark “shows that the primary reference . . . is not to the sealing of the text but to the depositing of the scroll.”²⁵ In partial support of this idea, he notes the similarity in the Hebrew wording of Moses’ command to the Levites to place the book of the law in the ark (see Deuteronomy 31:26) and Jeremiah’s instructions to Baruch about the hiding of the records he had written (see Jeremiah 32:10).²⁶

Wacholder notes that scholars hold differing opinions regarding the meaning of the sealed and public documents. One view is that legal documents were folded and sewn shut (the sealed portion) and that its main points were written on the back of the document. This summary constituted the public document.²⁷ The other view is that two separate documents

were prepared, one hidden away and the other turned over to the individual who needed the document as evidence of, for example, a purchase. The former view has the support of both the Mishnah (where *Baba Batra* 10:1 speaks of the folding of documents) and the fact that documents of this nature were found in the Bar Kochba caves of Wadi Murabba'at and at the nearby site of Masada. The idea of two separate documents is supported by the reference to both sealed and public documents in Jeremiah 32:11, 14.²⁸

The existence of sealed and open documents may shed light on passages that refer to a sealed portion of the Book of Mormon. While the entire book was sealed in the sense of being hidden up, a portion was physically sealed shut so that Joseph Smith could not translate it. Nephi's prophecy of the book explains:

But the words which are sealed he shall not deliver, neither shall he deliver the book. For the book shall be sealed by the power of God, and the revelation which was sealed shall be kept in the book until the own due time of the Lord, that they may come forth; for behold, they reveal all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof. And the day cometh that the words of the book which were sealed shall be read upon the house tops; and they shall be read by the power of Christ; and all things shall be revealed unto the children of men which ever have been among the children of men, and which ever will be even unto the end of the earth. But behold, it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall say unto him to whom he shall deliver the book: Take these words which are not sealed and deliver them to another, that he may show them unto the learned, saying: Read this, I pray thee. And the learned shall say: Bring hither the book, and I will read them. Touch not the things which are sealed, for I will bring them forth in mine own due time; for

I will show unto the children of men that I am able to do mine own work. (2 Nephi 27:10–11, 15, 21)

Moroni followed the example of Nephi (see 2 Nephi 27:21–22) and instructed the future translator of the work—Joseph Smith—to not translate “the things which I have sealed up.” He may have meant that Joseph should not take the original plates of Ether, which Moroni had hidden; however, the comment has generally been taken to mean that a physical seal had been placed on some of the plates so that Joseph Smith could not use that portion.²⁹

That sealed things are hidden is confirmed by 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). The keys of loosing that which has been sealed were committed to Joseph Smith. As the Lord declared, “I have given him the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed, until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead” (D&C 28:7). “And I have given unto him the keys of the mystery of those things which have been sealed, even things which were from the foundation of the world, and the things which shall come from this time until the time of my coming” (D&C 35:18). It was by this power that the prophet Joseph Smith gave us the Book of Mormon and other restored scriptures from ancient times.

Summary

Like other aspects of hidden documents, the practice of sealing records is known not only from the Book of Mormon, but from other ancient Near Eastern texts. Sealed documents are designed to serve as legal testimony, usually for future generations, and it is perhaps in this light that we should

understand some of Moroni's comments in the last chapter in the Book of Mormon. Moroni first noted, "I seal up these records" (Moroni 10:2), then informed his future audience how they can know the truth of those records by asking God (see Moroni 10:3–5). After some words of exhortation, he wrote:

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust? I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation. And God shall show unto you, that that which I have written is true. (Moroni 10:27–29)

Along with the ancient examples cited in this chapter, the Book of Mormon has come forth in our day from the box in which it was sealed and buried. It calls for us to test its authenticity by asking for a divine witness.

Notes

1. For a discussion, see Robert A. Cloward, "Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–248.

2. Mormon, evidently relying on Nephi's prophecy, also refers to "the prophecies of Isaiah" when writing about the book that would be hidden up to come forth at a later time (see Mormon 8:23–26).

3. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 5:391.

4. For other references to sealed records, in heaven and in earth, see Revelation 5:1–9; 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1 and the explanation

in D&C 77:6–7, 10, 13; 88:84; 98:2. Of the wicked acts of men, the Lord said to Moses, “Is not this laid up in store with me, and sealed up among my treasures?” (Deuteronomy 32:34; compare Job 14:17). For the seal on the Lord’s treasury for the printing of the scriptures, see D&C 104:61–67. Note also the expression “bind up the law and seal up the testimony” (see Isaiah 8:16 // 2 Nephi 18:16; D&C 88:84; 109:38, 46; 133:72).

5. James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:994.

6. *The Fragments of Artapanus* 3.26, in *ibid.*, 2:901.

7. See S. H. Hooke, *The Labyrinth* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 229, cited in Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala, Sweden: University of Uppsala, 1950), 28.

8. Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 291.

9. In Christian tradition, the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are represented by the four beasts that surround the throne of God. According to Revelation 5:8, these beasts, along with the twenty-four elders, were present when Christ broke the seven seals on the book.

10. Third section of the *Lefafa Sedek*, in Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Bandlet of Righteousness: An Ethiopian Book of the Dead* (London: Luzac, 1929), 69–70. On page 77 we read, “And straightway God spake unto the Twelve Apostles, and to the Seventy-two Disciples, and commanded them to write copies of this Book. . . . and he who shall lay the Book up in his house, shall never die the death.”

11. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, trans., *The Zohar* (New York: Rebecca Bennet Publications, 1958), 1:176.

12. See, for example, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaean*, 61 (song number 73); *Alma Rišaia Rba* 160, 331.

13. See the discussion and references in Jan Quaegebeur, “P. Brux Dem. E. 8258 une Lettre de Recommandation pour l’au delà,” in *Studies in Egyptology*, ed. Sarah Israelit-Groll (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1990), 2:776–95.

14. See the depiction in *ibid.*, 795.

15. See *Hymn of the Soul* 37–55, in Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), 412–13.

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

17. *Odes of Solomon* 23:5–10, 17, 21, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:755–56.

18. *The Book of Jasher* (Salt Lake City: J. H. Parry and Co., 1887), 72.

19. Jacob’s purchase of the rights to the cave of Machpelah from Esau is mentioned by Rashi on Genesis 46:6, citing *Midrash Tanhuma*. It is also noted in *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* 38. According to *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* 36, a deed was drawn up for Abraham’s purchase of the cave of Machpelah. Gerald Friedlander, trans., *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Hermon Press, 1965), 275–76.

20. *Book of Jasher*, 139.

21. *Ibid.*, 174.

22. Under the law of Moses, real estate could not pass from the family on a permanent basis. Consequently, close relatives were given first choice to purchase land put up for sale (see, for example, Ruth 4:1–9), while land sold to outsiders had to revert to the clan during the jubilee (fiftieth) year (see Leviticus 25:10, 13–16, 25–35; 27:24; Numbers 36:1–12). This ensured that tribal boundaries remained relatively stable.

23. Martínez, *Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 36.

24. See Ben Zion Wacholder, “The ‘Sealed’ Torah versus the ‘Revealed’ Torah: An Exegesis of Damascus Covenant V, 1–6 and Jeremiah 32, 10–14,” *Revue de Qumran* 12/47 (December 1986): 351–68.

25. *Ibid.*, 363.

26. See *ibid.*, 356.

27. For this and other aspects of sealed documents, see the discussion in John W. Welch, “Doubled, Sealed, Witnessed Documents: From the Ancient World to the Book of Mormon,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 391–444.

28. See Wacholder, “The ‘Sealed’ Torah versus the ‘Revealed’ Torah,” 358–59.

29. Elder Orson Pratt said that about two-thirds of the record was “sealed up, and Joseph was commanded not to break the seal; that part of the record was hid up” (*Journal of Discourses*, 3:347).