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Abstract: This paper examines current Latter-day Saint views of the Gold Plates and their significance as a tangible evidence of the Restoration.



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What Are We to Make of the Gold Plates?

Richard Lyman Bushman

During the winter of 2020–2021, I worked on the manuscript that was eventually published as *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (Oxford University Press, 2023). The book was an attempt to describe the many ways the plates had been imagined from the time they were first described as a “Golden Bible” in the June 1829 *Wayne Sentinel*¹ down to the Sunday School and missionary lessons today. I marveled at the enduring interest in the plates over time, not only among Latter-day Saints but also among other American writers. In my lifetime, the plates had appeared in the Book of Mormon musical and as the situational framework for Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize–winning *Angels in America*, first performed in 1993. I was convinced the plates’ endurance was partly due to the belief of the Saints. The fact that millions of people believed in their reality gave them heft. Without that belief, the plates would have become an easily forgotten historical oddity. It seemed to me that in the retelling of the plates’ history in the American imagination, the state of belief among Latter-day Saints today was a relevant piece of information.

To find out how belief in the plates stands today, I asked a group of scholarly believers to write a paragraph or two on how they currently think of the plates. Here is the letter I wrote:

1. “[Just about in this particular region],” *The Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, N.Y.), June 26, 1829, facsimile 2, BYU Digital Collections: 19th-Century Publications About the Book of Mormon (1829–1844), Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/4374/rec/1>.

Dear Friends:

Thanks to the extra time provided by the pandemic, I am nearing completion of a manuscript titled “Joseph Smith’s Gold Plates: A Cultural History.” It is essentially a survey of the way the plates have been treated in all kinds of literature and art forms from 1823 to the present.

As I approach the end, I realize it would be interesting to add an appendix containing current Latter-day Saint views of the plates. I am not thinking so much of Church manuals and websites as the personal views of thoughtful and informed Latter-day Saints. How do we currently feel about this distinctive feature of our history?

I am hoping to collect comments of a paragraph to a page. Would you be interested in contributing? I would like to have enough statements by the middle of January to form a respectable appendix.

If you would like to participate, let me know. Once I have the comments collected, I will send them around to the contributors for revision and editing.

All the best,
Richard

Eventually, I received twenty responses, which I included as an appendix in the manuscript I sent to Oxford University Press.² But they never made it into print. The editor thought there was no place for the statements in the book, and they were left out. He may have felt that the implicit testimony-bearing did not belong in a scholarly volume, even though I had included my own testimony on the first page.

What did the scholars have to say? We all know the gold plates are among the most exotic of our beliefs: There is nothing quite like them in religious history, and they were a bizarre item to appear in nineteenth-century rural culture. Do we even know for sure they ever existed? Joseph Smith’s refusal to show them to anyone other than specially selected witnesses arouses suspicion, and it does not help that they were taken away by the angel after translation and now are no longer accessible. I was interested in how the prevailing skepticism had affected Latter-day Saint scholars. Was belief fading?

The most significant result of my modest poll is that the plates still have a place in Latter-day Saint thought. All respondents accepted the reality of the plates; only one respondent questioned the materiality of the plates. This one exception, the media scholar John Peters, acknowledged the

2. I began asking for statements on the plates in December 2020 and had assembled them by April 2021. I emailed thirty-seven requests and received twenty statements. They currently reside in my files.

significance of Joseph Smith's claim. Peters observed that the plates were a bold stroke against the flow of religious thought at that time.

The plates tied Joseph Smith's revelations and claims to authority to material objects in time and place. They cut wonderfully against the grain of other religious thinkers in his time eager to consign ritual and history to the realm of metaphor. Smith's contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, resigned as a Unitarian minister in 1832 because he could not in good conscience administer the Lord's Supper: he found it a historical anachronism and "a painful impediment." He wanted a faith free of what he thought was misplaced concreteness. The plates, in contrast, seemed to stake a claim in tangible reality and have a rather literal thingliness. There is a long history since Moroni retrieved them of thinking about the plates as things among things like billiard balls, stones, and trees.

While admiring Joseph Smith's bravura in claiming to have gold plates, Peters takes issue with this "thingliness," not because he thinks the plates are obviously fantasies—the objection most would raise—but for aesthetic reasons. "This fraud-or-fidelity way of thinking about the golden plates has always felt to me like a painful impediment. There are more edifying and less brittle ways of thinking about faith-contingent objects." Peters feels the plates are more elusive than that: "The witnesses described them as sacred if bulky objects that materialized and vanished at the command of angels." The ability to see them depended on the viewer's righteousness, not the natural eyes.³ Peters thinks the plates "were more grounded than metaphors but less leaden than profane objects." That's what I mean by aesthetic objections to plates that were as solid as billiard balls. Seeing them as things makes them leaden. Peters is seeking for something more elusive and evocative than a heavy stack of metal sheets.

Peters was the only contributor to finesse the question of the plates' material existence. Many of the comments acknowledged the pressure

3. See Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grand Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2013), 82–85, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-june-1829-e-dc-17/1>; Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2012), 314–16; "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. [11], bk. 8, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/103>.

of modern skepticism, but they all held on to the plates' physicality. They felt the plates just went with being a Latter-day Saint. Philip Barlow, a historian of religion, observed that "my people are given to wonders and portents intrinsic to the stories of their origins: angels and revelation, seers and seer-stones, healings and gifts of the spirit. The gold plates are but one among these otherworldly strains." That's what it means to be a Latter-day Saint, Barlow is saying: You believe in marvels.

Barlow was not "tempted to bracket the plates or other tokens of the supernatural from the story. They came as a parcel." The plates flow together with other miraculous encounters in Latter-day Saint culture. Cherry Silver, my sister and a literary historian, wrote that "on a very few occasions I have experienced connections with loved ones beyond this mortal life. With this evidence of the divine, it is only a step more to accept that an infinite being could choose to use ancient writings on gold plates as a way to bring forth light and understanding to his children."

The writer Glen Nelson, who composed an operatic libretto about the gold plates, put it another way: "For me and for the people I imagine experiencing these works, we are so confident in the story that we are comfortable teasing out humor, theater, and art from it."

Barlow, Silver, and Nelson live in two worlds: the world of modern rationalism and the world of belief—a division Latter-day Saints understand. Like the three of them, most Latter-day Saints are committed to a world of wondrous happenings overlaying the world of common-sense rationalism. They have made a choice to live in both worlds and are happy with this decision.

Acceptance has not always implied engagement with the plates. The historian Jed Woodworth wrote that each day he walks by a sculpture of the witnesses viewing the plates in a bas-relief on the wall of the Church History Library in Salt Lake City. He pays them little heed even though he believes implicitly in their reality. "I am not inclined to pass off the plates as mere metaphor as other Christians have done with their sacred stories. . . . I accept God's intervention in human affairs and the plates as an actual, physical artifact, just as Joseph Smith and the witnesses described them." But "as I pass these panels from day to day, I don't agonize over them. The depictions do not call forth my resistance." On the other hand, "the events depicted in the panels do not overawe me either. Despite the unavoidable presence of the plates in my life, they are a distant presence for me, a relic from the past. God had a work to do, and He did it through the plates. God's work today calls forth different methods and means."

The philosopher James Faulconer feels much the same. “The truth is that I don’t think about the Gold Plates very much. I suppose that in their regard I am a naïve believer: Part of my experience of conversion was the acceptance of their reality. . . . I’m interested in . . . the revealed text, more than in the physical object to which it is somehow or another correlated or in that correlation itself. I take the existence of the plates as a given, but not one that draws my attention.” For Woodworth and Faulconer, belief in the plates is implicit in their faith, but the plates no longer matter that much. Later in this paper, I will challenge this attitude, but I think it likely that most Latter-day Saints feel the same way. We simply have no reason to think much about the plates. We don’t defend them; we don’t speculate about them. They are on deposit somewhere in our memories, and that is about all.

I would say that all the respondents were aware that the plates are an affront to common sense and ordinary reason, but they were perfectly content with that. The historian Kathleen Flake saw the plates as an antidote for any inclination to make our religion seem perfectly rational. Too many miracles appear in the story. “I am mostly amused,” she wrote, “by how effectively the golden plates challenge efforts, academic or otherwise, to rationalize Mormonism.”

As I said before, most of us live in two worlds: a rational, common-sense world on the one hand and a marvelous world of miracles and gold plates on the other. The theologian Kim Matheson finds the demand for a degree of credulity bracing. “Mormonism’s gold plates serve as a religious embarrassment of the very best kind,” she wrote. “They are the kind of thing that force my devotions into tangibility, that root me to the material commitments of my faith tradition, and that prevent me from escaping into more respectable spiritualized abstractions.” Matheson doesn’t mind that the plates seem out of place in modern thinking. She even thinks that the plates are purposely provocative, comparing the plates to the Resurrection. “I think of the gold plates the way I think of the body of Jesus: tangible and suspiciously absent, whose logic (crazy-and-yet . . . , laughable-but-still . . .) performs the very structure of faith.” In other words, the embarrassment of the plates is in some ways briskly beneficial; it requires us to exercise faith. The plates and Jesus’s return from the tomb both run against common sense and disrupt our complacent acceptance of the ordinary.

The cultural historian Terryl Givens argues that this demand is on purpose, perhaps even essential.

It would seem that the brute physicality of the plates—their brazen resistance to allegorizing or spiritualizing—has to be the point. It would have been so much more prudent, so much safer, for Smith to claim the Book of Mormon derived from a personal revelation, or spirit-led automatic writing, or—as with Doctrine and Covenants 7—a transcription of a visionary artefact. Why articulate instead the most testable, the most implausible, the most seemingly disprovable of claims? Actual plates of gold written by ancient Israelites and hidden in an upstate New York hillside. The artefactual concreteness of this origin story seems a deliberate, essential parallel to the Resurrection of Christ himself. As a “scandal of Christianity” (in Emil Brunner’s words), the Resurrection was an assertion that went as far as possible against the universalizing of Christianity’s claims. It was a barrier, a threshold, that one could not pass without sacrificing the tenacious hold of one’s inherited cultural and rational suppositions. Both accounts—early Christian and Restorationist—defied casual belief, or painless discipleship.

The fantastic nature of the plates, Givens is saying, is meant to disrupt our assumptions and require a sacrifice of us. We must endure the shame of a belief at odds with today’s common sense.

In one form or another, others asked about the plates providing access to another world. Are they designed to give us a glimpse of something marvelous and magnificent? Philip Barlow wondered, “Might Joseph Smith’s visions provide a glimpse of realities that operate upon principles beyond what we detect in everyday life with our five humble senses—like wormholes that warp time and space or like the ‘bizarre’ quantum laws governing entangled particles that are light-years apart?”

Judge Tom Griffith feels the plates are all the more challenging because there is substantial evidence that they actually existed. “As with the first Christians, eyewitnesses claim that this modern miracle is a historical reality. Those gold plates were seen, touched, hefted, and examined by many who then believed that history had once again ‘been invaded by God in Christ’ in a way that changed everything. And while we know little about the ancient New Testament eyewitnesses, we know much about the more recent eyewitnesses to the gold plates who left abundant records of their lives.” The eyewitnesses confront us with physical evidence for God’s intervention. That makes the plates a challenge. Griffith adds that “the gold plates prod the skeptic to allow for the possibility that reality includes God and Christ and angels and moral laws that shape and mold us into different types of beings than we might otherwise be, and that God in Christ has undertaken a major project for

all the world in our time.” The plates lead us to a God who points us to a higher life than what we find on earth.

The plates as a prod turned up in other statements. The historian Matt Bowman wrote that the plates may lead us to question our most basic cultural assumption: the dominance of science. Bowman suggests that science may not be as secure in its foundations as we think. The plates “may be relevant even beyond believers in Joseph Smith’s revelations because they remind the world that our scientism, our empiricism, our rationality is only one way human beings have sought to engage with the world, and however useful it has been, it still remains the product of history and therefore subject to its own limitations and fragility.”

I identify with the confidence of these scholars. We are miles away from having made the case that science is fragile and other worlds are possible, but these writers sense the potential. They know what they are up against in questioning the prevailing orthodoxy. But given the fact that there is a respectable body of evidence that the witnesses actually saw and held the plates, the eyewitness accounts challenge rationalists to think twice about the supernatural world.⁴

Another category of respondents were less preoccupied with the rationalist challenge than in asking what we learn from the plates about God’s care for his children. These contributors interpreted the plates’ story as they would a parable. “The plates remind me,” said the historian Kate Holbrook, “of how generations of mortals (writers, collectors, editors, and translators) were asked to do more than they were capable of—and agreed to try anyway. They worked without any promise God would protect their sincere efforts from derision. They worked, in fact, knowing that those who found worth in their words would experience ridicule for that belief. These gallant souls never believed God would make a masterpiece of their contributions, only that he would augment their contributions just enough to fulfill his purposes.”

Similarly, Margaret Hemmings, recent editor of *Exponent II*, values the plates for conveying hundreds of human stories. The Book of Mormon plates bore a record less of God’s words than of his people’s struggles.

4. Steven C. Harper, “The Eleven Witnesses,” 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 M. Hull (Religious Studies Center; Deseret Book, 2015), 117–32, <https://rsc.byu.edu/coming-forth-book-mormon/eleven-witnesses>.

The text is, overall, much more a narrative about people than a sermon from God. It is a record of individuals and societies struggling internally and with one another. A huge portion of the Book of Mormon concerns itself with human endeavors: corruption, violence, slavery, systems of government, and establishing churches. . . . The stories of people, with all their failings and foibles and mistakes and successes, are sacred. . . . The very existence of the Book of Mormon—a book of records, a book of stories that is so important it was written on golden plates for preservation—signals God’s regard for human narratives.

These are warmhearted responses to the Book of Mormon from observers with compassion and insight.

In the same vein, J. B. Haws, a Maxwell Institute historian, wrote the following claim about the plates: “Humans created them, and God imbued them with the power to transmit his grace in the form of a message that can transform the reader. The plates’ survival and sheer existence witnessed that God had acknowledged their existence, had preserved them, had endorsed them, had blessed them. This really is the story of God’s way of dealing with all of humanity.” The plates are a demonstration of God using human history to reveal himself and his purposes.

Alone among the contributors, the literary scholar Rosalynde Welch took off in another direction entirely, one that particularly interested me. She addressed the mystery of translation. How are prophets called and inspired to speak divine truth via “oracular” objects such as the plates or the seer stones? Welch implicitly addresses a puzzle we now have concerning the plates’ role in translation. What was their purpose when much of the time they lay on a table covered with a cloth? Was anything on the plates getting through to Joseph Smith when he did not even look at them? How does the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone bridge this gap? Welch finds clues in the Book of Mormon itself: “The paradigm for this account of prophecy is the episode of Lehi’s discovery of the brass ball at his tent door in 1 Nephi 16. In this theologically and typologically charged scene, the two figures, prophet and oracular object, seem to call one another into their sacred roles.” That statement is worth repeating for emphasis.

The two figures, prophet and oracular object, seem to call one another into their sacred roles. . . . Each is necessary for the full realization of the other’s power: The object mediates the prophet’s mantic authority, while the prophet’s gaze accesses the object’s oracular power. A similar account of immanent prophetic authority is seen in the Book of

Mormon prophet Mosiah and his interpreter stones, the Jaredite seer and his illuminated stones, and arguably in Nephi and the sword of Laban. These episodes, it seems to me, may illuminate the phenomenological process by which Joseph's own experience of prophetic power emerged in his encounter with physical plates.

In other words, there was some kind of interaction between seer, seer stone, and gold plates comparable to Lehi learning from the Liahona. We are not told exactly how translation of the plates worked, but it is useful to compare other instances of a prophet resonating with an object and the two together producing a message from God. We don't understand the mechanics, but we glimpse the possibilities.

Welch, along with Joe Spencer and Grant Hardy, also sees the plates as a complication. They pose an interesting conundrum: How do we understand the current Book of Mormon text when we lack access to the original? Most translations can be checked against the original to detect any distortions introduced by the translator. We can determine what was actually in the original and what was added or altered by the translation. But we can't evaluate the text of the Book of Mormon when we lack access to the original on the plates. As Welch put it, "The absence of an authoritative original text inscribed on the plates—an absence repeated in the disappearance of the first 116 pages of the manuscript—conditions the way in which the Book of Mormon can be interpreted as scripture, ruling out interpretive fundamentalism that seeks a stable, anchoring original text." We can't adhere exactly to the words given to the Nephite prophets when we cannot know exactly what they said. All we have is a translated text, one that necessarily departed from the original as all translations do. Welch wrote, "Mediated social translations of the Book of Mormon—not unlike Lehi's brass ball with its continually revised divine writing—are the only texts available for interpretation. And as a matter of general hermeneutics, the absent plates recommend a mode of reading scripture attuned to plurality, improvisation, and performativity." How much the translated text and gold plates text conform with one another—this we cannot check for ourselves.

I believe it was because of these circumstances that the textual scholar Joseph Spencer wrote that the plates should be left out of consideration when we approach the Book of Mormon. The task assigned in the scripture itself is "to read the words of the Book of Mormon, quite regardless of the plates." Under the circumstance, Spencer wrote, the plates are a distraction. We can believe with Royal Skousen that the translation Joseph received by revelation was tightly controlled; the translator spoke

only what was revealed to him.⁵ But how far that revealed translation conformed to the text on the plates cannot be known. We could waste a lot of effort guessing at what Nephi wrote and what Joseph spoke. It is better, I think Spencer is telling us, to work with the Book of Mormon as it is—there on the printed page—rather than try to guess how translation altered the original Nephi.

Thinking along the same lines, a historian of both Asian culture and the Book of Mormon, Grant Hardy, elaborated the problem. “Our English version cannot have been a literal translation of the Nephite record, since anachronistic phrasing from the King James Bible, as well as other elements of nineteenth-century Christianity, indicate a rather free rendition, or an updating of the ancient source.” Hardy is not saying that Joseph Smith contrived the Book of Mormon himself. He tells us that “I personally believe the text was revealed to Smith in a fairly exact form.” Hardy is simply saying that the Book of Mormon as revealed to Joseph Smith may have expanded on the ancient writing, introducing a lot of nineteenth-century material in order to reach a modern audience. We don’t know how much of the text existed in the original and how much was added in the process of inspired translation.

In this state of uncertainty, what is the role of the plates? Should we choose not to consider them to avoid being distracted, as Spencer recommends? No, Hardy says, they have a critical function: “The plates, assuming their ancient construction, would have been evidence to Joseph, his early associates, and modern believers that there was some historical basis for the scriptural narrative he published in 1830.” Under-scoring Hardy’s point, Savannah Eccles Johnston wrote that “the reality of the plates asserts the historicity of the Book of Mormon. If the gold plates are real, then the civilizations documented on the plates were real.” The Book of Mormon was not purely a nineteenth-century revelation. The plates created a link between modern readers and the ancient prophets.

As you can see, then, the solicited comments lead us into deep water. I appreciate the merit in all of them. To sum up, I have divided the responses into five categories:

1. John Peters prefers to understand the plates as an elusive creation of faith rather than a leaden reality.

5. See Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 22–31.

2. Others accept the plates because they are one with Latter-day Saint belief in miraculous happenings. Yes, they are at odds with modern scientific belief, but as a people, we accept such things.
3. The plates are a calculated provocation. Like the Resurrection of Christ, they lead us into world of divine visitations and miracles, challenging smug secular materialism.
4. The plates can be read as a parable of how a kind Heavenly Father honors the life stories of his people.
5. Finally, the plates—or rather their absence—complicate our understanding of the Book of Mormon. Without them, we can never pin down how much of the text was in the original and how much translation shaped the result. We can only deal with the text as we have it.

What about my own view of the plates? When I solicited these statements from other scholars, I thought it only fair that I include my own views among them. Here is what I wrote:

If you want to believe in the gold plates, as I do, a case can be made. Accepting their reality does not require a complete abandonment of rationality. Foremost among the evidences are the eleven men besides Joseph Smith who say they saw the plates. Their statements, printed in the Book of Mormon, were never repudiated. I am impressed that Oliver Cowdery wrote a friend about the experience in October 1829 soon after the vision of the plates was alleged to have occurred.⁶ The witnesses saw something.

Beyond the witnesses are all the people who touched or lifted the plates while they were in Smith's possession. The evidence for Smith having something like the plates was strong enough to persuade Dan Vogel, a skeptical historian, that Smith possessed some object with their shape, size, and weight, perhaps a set of tin plates he fabricated.⁷ I don't subscribe to Vogel's tin-plate hypothesis, but I do think the plates were a tactile reality to the people around Smith.

Then there was a personal experience with the Egyptologist Richard Parker. While I was at Brown University on a fellowship in 1965, I asked Parker, a member of the faculty, about an article by Ariel Crowley on the Anthon Transcript. Crowley examined the characters copied from the plates for Martin Harris to show to the Columbia linguist

6. To read about this interaction, see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 56.

7. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Signature Books, 2004), 98.

Charles Anthon. Crowley compared each character on the transcript to characters from Egyptian lexicons. Every one of over two hundred characters had an Egyptian equivalent.⁸ When I called on Parker to ask about the validity of Crowley's argument, I was surprised to learn that Parker himself had helped Crowley locate the characters. Were they really Egyptian? I asked. Not really, he said. They were more like Meroitic, an upper Nile language that was written in Egyptian characters but was an independent tongue. That seemed to me to fit the idea of Hebrew being written in Egyptian as the Book of Mormon describes its own text. The experience left me with a conviction that Joseph had access to Egyptian from somewhere, and perhaps it was from the plates. All of this—the witnesses, the many touches and lifts, and the Anthon characters—makes an argument for the plates that I can buy.

In addition, the plates are embedded in a story that concludes with a published text, the Book of Mormon, which is itself a marvel. I cannot conceive of Joseph Smith writing that book on his own. It is too complex, too weird, too compelling to be a product of his twenty-four-year-old mind. For me, the book's text disrupts any simple explanation of its origins. Adding gold plates and an inspired translation to the mix seems to me in keeping with the extraordinary nature of the book.

I have lived with the gold plates long enough—all my life—not to be offended by their existence. They seem beautiful and strange in a wonderful way. They don't strike me as an excrescence or offense. A gold book telling the story of two fallen civilizations written in a mysterious hybrid of Egyptian and Hebrew is astounding. It is a fitting introduction to the unusual qualities of Mormon theology. I am happy to live in a world I share with the gold plates.

Comparing this statement with the other entries, mine seems more old-fashioned and less sophisticated. It falls into the category of straight apologetics: what reasons we have to believe in the plates.

Taken together, these comments, every one of them useful, offer a complex account of the plates' meaning for Latter-day Saints today. The comments of my friends got me to thinking. What if the plates gradually faded from our stories, our manuals, our thoughts? We are certainly not

8. Ariel L. Crowley, "The Anthon Transcript I," *Improvement Era* 45, no. 1 (January 1942): 14–15, 58–60, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/162fc54a-0d84-4b4e-b94f-fbc2b3d0ad0b/0/0>; Ariel L. Crowley, "The Anthon Transcript II: The Identification of the Characters as Egyptian," *Improvement Era* 45, no. 2 (February 1942): 76–80, 124–25, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e7d3d9e1-2271-4d9d-a895-ea559e929d1c/0/0>; "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 13 (May 2, 1842): 772–73, https://archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_times-and-seasons_1842-05-01_3_13/page/n5/mode/2up.

repudiating the plates, but the fact is that they are rarely mentioned in sacrament talks or in any branch of our preaching. They are touched on only once in the missionary lessons and then but briefly. We no longer make much of the biblical evidence for the plates—the stick of Joseph and the stick of Judah in Ezekiel 37 that were key bits of evidence at one time.⁹ Given our current lack of interest, would anything of value be lost if we forgot them altogether?

One way to assess the plates' importance is to examine them against the backdrop of the Protestant Reformation. One among many of the transformations that Protestantism wrought in the sixteenth century was to move the center of religious life from the historical to the psychological. The Catholic imagination was rooted in events headed by the birth of Christ, the Crucifixion (often described in gory details), and the Resurrection. Gospel events were followed by the miracles wrought by the Saints and the valiant acts of the crusaders. Individuals were elevated to sainthood only if they had performed a miraculous act. Everywhere there was vivid miraculous action involving supernatural beings intervening in human life. For a time, every church was expected to have a relic under its altar, fragments of bone, hair, furniture, or clothing memorializing a Saint's miraculous acts. The walls and windows of Catholic churches were covered with depictions of Moses and the tablets, events in Christ's life, miracles wrought by the Saints, and the heroism of Catholic warriors. Catholics lived in a world of constant divine action. As the political scientist Louis Midgely said in his response, "Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have been and still are much concerned to constantly remind themselves that Christian faith consists of and is also grounded in and rests upon certain crucial historical events."

Protestants changed this emphasis. They denuded the walls of their churches, erasing images of divine events. They were iconoclasts who dismissed accounts of saints and their miracles as purely superstition. Godly miracles were declared to have ended with Christ and were no longer needed. Post-Christ, only Satan performed miracles; if an angel appeared, the evil one was behind it. Worship came to focus on preaching and the word. What mattered to Protestants were the dramas of the

9. *A Systematic Program for Teaching the Gospel: Prepared for the Use of Missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952), 95–108; *A Uniform System for Teaching Investigators* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1961), 29–38.

soul—faith and the workings of the heart. Religion became increasingly psychological and intellectual. The basic events of the Incarnation and the Resurrection remained in Protestant sacred history, of course, but at the heart of Protestant religion was belief and faith.¹⁰

The Latter-day Saint Restoration unavoidably drew from its Protestant environment. We too have emphasized the psychological: how we feel in our hearts and what we believe. Our crucial life passage is gaining a testimony, which we acquire by praying and listening to the feelings God plants in our hearts. As we mature, we seek comfort from Christ, promptings to do good, and spiritual confirmation that our doctrines are true. In turn, we teach our children to listen to the Spirit. Following in the Protestant tradition, our religion as practiced today is heavily psychological, by which I mean internal—of the heart, the spirit, the mind.

But while Latter-day Saint religion is deeply psychological, we also share the Catholic emphasis on the historical. Our faith is based on actual events that occurred in historical time. We do not populate the world with either witches or saints performing miracles, but we do believe in angels visiting the earth and occasional visits of the Father and the Son. Our religion began with a series of momentous happenings: the appearance of Christ and God; Moroni in Joseph's bedroom and at the hill; John the Baptist bestowing priesthood; Peter, James, and John with further priesthood; Christ in the temple as well as Moses and the ancient prophets. These events lie at the center of the Restoration. We are not a purely psychological faith. We believe that actual events in time and space inaugurated the Restoration. In fact, the historical events are central to our faith. The Book of Mormon, the priesthood, and temples were all founded on earthly visitations from heavenly beings.

How do we hold on to the historical events of the Restoration—the appearances, the ordinations, the translations, the bestowal of ancient records? Over the past two centuries, the historical parts of religion have been the ones under the greatest pressure. A number of the scholars mentioned in this article acknowledge the strong headwinds of secular, material culture pressing against belief in historical events. The gold

10. For large-scale commentary on the Catholic-Protestant transition, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 146–211; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Oxford University Press, 1971); and Philip M. Soergel, *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 33–46.

plates run against the grain of standard modern truth, as do all angelic and divine communications.

In Christianity generally, the twentieth century saw a deep erosion of faith in the heroic events of Judeo-Christian religion. The visions, the healings, and above all the Resurrection were spiritualized, transformed into metaphors, and stripped of their historical reality. Secular pressures were too much for liberal Protestant scholars and clergy trying to live in both the realm of historic Christianity and the modern skeptical world. For many Protestants, especially the intellectuals, faith in a series of literal supernatural events slowly faded.

We still live in the midst of that ongoing struggle. How is it affecting us? Recently, a path has opened for Latter-day Saints to follow the course of liberal Protestants. Ann Taves, a highly respected scholar of American religion with deep and sympathetic interest in Mormonism, has told the story of the gold plates in a way that deals with these pressures. She writes with remarkable empathy of a Joseph Smith who truly experiences visions and has plates. He is not lying about them, and he is not self-deceived, she says. The plates are real—but real like the wafer in the Eucharist, where the priest and the communicants truly believe that the wafer is the body of Christ. Taves believes Joseph Smith was as sincere as those priests; there were gold plates as surely as the body of Christ dwells in the wafers. She offers us a set of plates that are real for Joseph Smith and perhaps for all who believed him, just not quite historically or materially real.¹¹

That is the way we might go if we were to follow the course of twentieth-century liberal Protestantism: Hold on to the plates but yield a little on their historicity. Is that our destiny? Does anything stand in the way of these trends, or, perhaps more accurately, what has God provided as a defense of our historical faith?

If we look to the Resurrection as a precedent for the plates, as several scholarly respondents did, we remember all the ways that Christ assured the disciples of the living reality of his Resurrection: the appearances, the conversations, the instructions after he died, the meals eaten together. We recall the response to the doubter Thomas. Christ invited him to “reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing”

11. Ann Taves, “History and Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates,” in *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism and Sacred Texts*, ed. Blair G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, and Boyd J. Petersen (Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 93–120.

(John 20:27). To a doubter, Christ offers a touch of his wounds—a palpable sensory feeling.

Again, in the memorable scene in 3 Nephi on Christ's visit to America, Jesus told the multitude to "arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hand and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world" (3 Ne. 11:14). Christ again offered touch as the sensory basis of belief.

We were not there and did not feel the wounds, but we take the reports as testimony of the reality of Christ's return from the grave. In my opinion, the gold plates are the wounds of the Restoration. As John Peters said, they stand apart from other forms of witness in their billiard-ball tactility. They were a thing, a heavy stack of metal sheets Joseph had to lug home from the hill. They were hidden under the floorboards and covered with a cloth. They were held and balanced on a knee.

Moreover, witnesses saw and felt the plates. "The translator of this work, has shown unto us the plates of which hath been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon."¹² We may not review the witnesses' statements very often or teach them in our classes, but they remain there in the front of every copy of the Book of Mormon as a tactile obstacle to disbelief. The gift of the witnesses and the publication of their statements in every Book of Mormon indicates to me that we are meant to remember the plates, to value them as evidence much as Christ's wounds testify of the Resurrection.

For me, this is the meaning of the plates. They are the most durable, forceful support for the historical side of our religion. They tie us primarily to one figure—the angel Moroni. But in leaving space for him, they open a way for other heavenly visitors. The plates prop open the door to an ensemble of angelic beings entering ordinary life.

If we give up on the plates by letting them fall into disuse, never having them in mind, never discussing them, we lose the most tangible proof of divine persons entering history. We risk letting the historical side of our faith slip away. We may not dwell on the plates or always expound on them, but we certainly do not want to forget them.

12. "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses," in Joseph Smith Jr., trans., *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), viii.

I would like to end with one final comment, a point not mentioned by any of the commentators: I am impressed with the beauty of the plates. As described by those who saw them, they were a stack of hammered gold sheets, dusky with age, bound with gold rings, engraved with mysterious characters, telling the story of a doomed civilization that brought about its own destruction through rebellion against God. For me, that is a glorious image. Add the fact that the plates were a material witness of an angelic visitation, and we have an artifact worthy of our regard.

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