



Type: Book Chapter

---

## Concerning the Plates of the Book of Mormon

Author(s): Janne M. Sjö Dahl

Source: *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon*

Published: Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1927

Pages: 35–46

---

**Abstract:** No abstract available.

*"For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes; the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered.*

*"And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee; and he saith I cannot; for it is sealed:*

*"And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.*

*"Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:*

*"Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder; for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid."*

*Isaiab 29:10-14*

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONCERNING THE PLATES OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

THERE are, as far as I know, no data from which to calculate, with accuracy, the number of plates contained in the original volume of the Book of Mormon, or their weight. And yet, such questions have been discussed by unfriendly critics of the book.

*The Rev. Mr. M. T. Lamb's Objections.* The Rev. M. T. Lamb, for instance, who, in 1886 or 87, favored the Saints in Utah with a series of lectures against the sacred volume, and was courteously tendered the use of ward houses for that purpose, told us that the 563 pages of the American text would have required at least an equal number of plates. Consequently, he said, there were, on the most liberal estimate possible, enough plates only for from one-third to one-eighth of the text as printed in the American edition.

He arrived at this conclusion by accepting the dimensions of the plates as 7x8 inches, and the thickness of the volume as four inches. He allowed fifty plates for an inch, making two hundred plates in all. But the prophet, he said, did not translate more than one-third of the two hundred; that is to say, 66 or 67 plates, and he could not by any possibility have obtained the entire book, as we have it, from such a small number of plates.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>M. T. Lamb, *The Golden Bible*, pp. 245-50.

Others have asserted that if the Prophet Joseph had a sufficient number of gold plates to contain the entire text of the Book of Mormon, they would have been too heavy to handle as a book. They would have weighed about 500 pounds or more.

By such statements the critics have hoped to break the "Mormon" pitcher at the threshold, as the Greek saying is. If they could make it appear that the prophet could not have had a sufficient number of plates; or, if he had, that he could not have lifted them, they felt that thereby they could remove the entire foundation of the Church, and leave nothing further to discuss. It is, therefore, interesting to consider just what data we have bearing on that subject, and what conclusions we may reasonably draw from them.

*The Prophet Joseph's Own Account.* The prophet writes:

"These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold; each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite as thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings, in Egyptian characters, and bound together in a volume as the leaves of a book with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction, and much skill in the art of engraving. With the records was found a curious instrument, which the ancients called 'urim and thummim,' which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate. Through the medium of the urim and thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God."—Joseph Smith, in a letter to John Wentworth, Editor of the *Chicago*

*Democrat*, March 1, 1842. (*History of the Church*, Vol. 4, p. 535).

*No Definite Data Now at Hand.* It should be noted, however, that the Prophet Joseph does not enlighten us on the number or weight of the plates, any more than does Moses on the size and avoirdupois of the tables on which the Lord engraved the law. It should also be remembered that the particulars furnished by the eye witnesses were given many years after they had seen the plates, in answer to questions pressed upon them in the course of what amounted almost to cross examination. They give, therefore, their individual estimates and nothing more.

Suppose, for the sake of illustration, that two or more men should be examined on the dimensions of a book—say Webster's Dictionary—twenty years after they had seen it. What would their answers be, provided there was no collusion between them? They would call up from the depths of their mind the image produced there so many years ago and then give, each his own estimate as best he could. I remember one occasion on which some students were together and the question of estimating dimensions came up. A "stove pipe hat" was placed in the middle of the floor, where there was no object close by to compare it with, and the question was asked, What is the height of that hat? The estimates, quickly made, varied and ranged all the way from four to ten inches. The actual height, I believe, was five and a half inches. I dare say a carpenter, or any other mechanic, would have come pretty close to the actual figure, when the object was before him; but

what would his estimate be many years afterwards? Probably either over or under the actual figure, but that would not affect his credibility as a witness to the fact that he had actually seen and handled the object in question.

*Size of the Plates.* The Prophet Joseph, as we have just read gives the size as six by eight inches.

David Whitmer, in an interview in the *Kansas City Journal*, said of the plates, shortly before his death:

‘They appeared to be of gold, about six by nine inches in size, about as thick as parchment, a great many in number and bound together like the leaves of a book by massive rings passing through the edges.’<sup>2</sup>

Martin Harris, according to *Myth of the Manuscript Found*,<sup>3</sup> estimated the plates at eight by seven inches and the thickness of the volume at four inches, each plate being as thick as thick tin.

Orson Pratt had not seen the plates, himself, but his intimacy with the prophet and the eye witnesses lends some weight to his words. He tells us that the plates were eight by seven inches, and that the entire volume was about six inches, while each plate was about as thick as common tin. Orson Pratt also says that two-thirds of the volume was sealed.

Such are the really slight variations in the statements made on the dimensions of the plates. David Whitmer’s estimate of the size amounts to 54 square inches, but he says nothing of the thickness of the

---

<sup>2</sup>This is quoted from *The Prophet of Palmyra*, and may, or may not, be authentic.

<sup>3</sup>An excellent little book by George Reynolds.

volume. Martin Harris gives us 56 square inches as the size of the plates and 4 inches as the thickness of the volume. Orson Pratt accepts the first figures of Martin Harris but gives 6 inches as the thickness of the volume, as does the Prophet Joseph. According to the latter, each plate had a surface of 48 square inches.

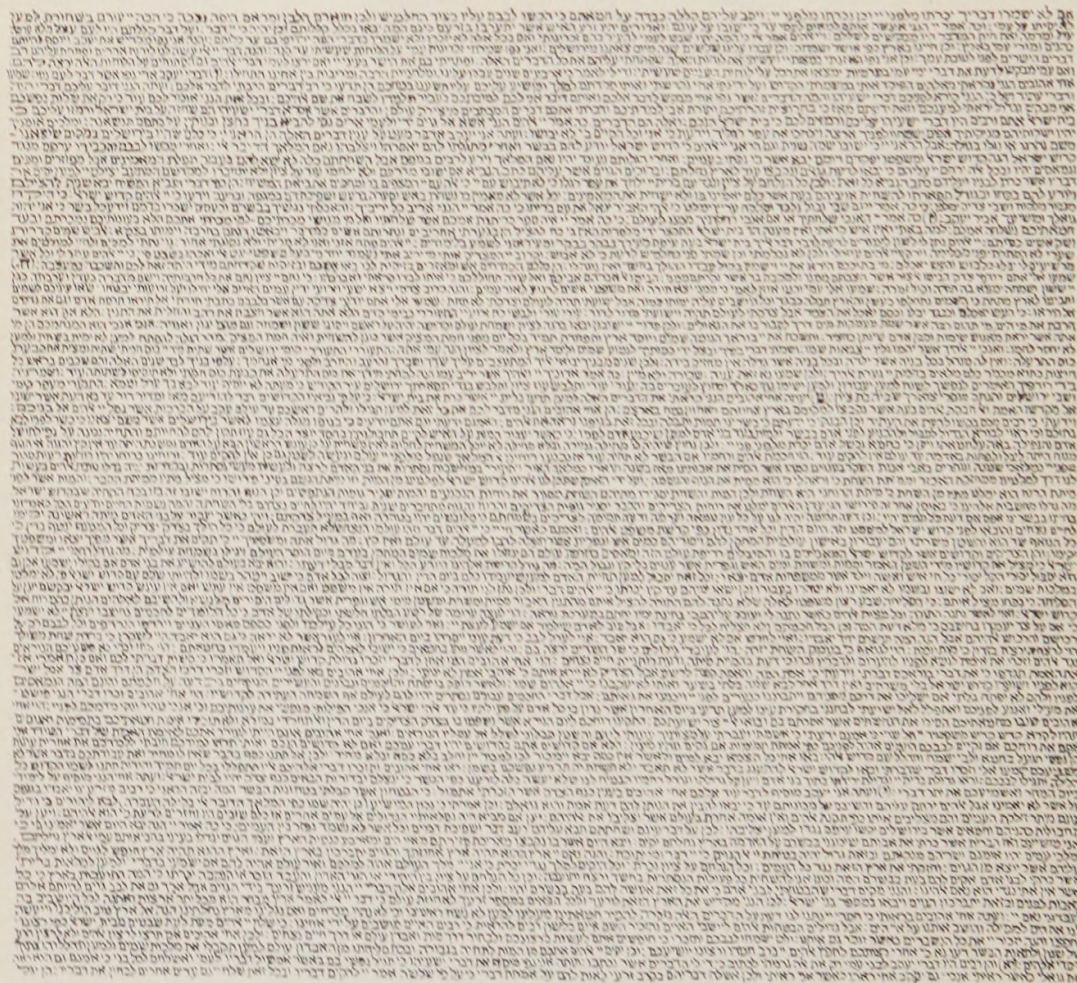
The question before us is, Could one-third (two-thirds being sealed) of a volume of metal leaves 6x8x6 (the Prophet Joseph) or 8x7x4 inches (Martin Harris), or 8x7x6 inches (Orson Pratt), contain a sufficient number of plates, each as thick as parchment or tin, to yield the necessary space for the entire text of the Book of Mormon? If so, what about their immense weight?

*Two Remarkable Illustrations.* The accompanying illustrations are a complete answer to these questions. (See pages 40 and 41.)

The first is a facsimile of a sheet of paper, 8x7 inches, upon which a Hebrew translation of fourteen pages of the American text of the Book of Mormon have been written in the modern, square Hebrew letters in common use. The translation was made by my friend Mr. Henry Miller, a Hebrew by birth, thoroughly versed in the Hebrew language, and a member of the Church. It is demonstrated on this sheet that the entire text of the Book of Mormon, as the American readers have it, could have been written in Hebrew on 40  $\frac{3}{7}$  pages—21 plates in all.

If it is thought that these characters are too small to be read, it should be remembered that, in the illustration, they are reduced to one-fourth of the size in

written by Mr. Miller wrote them, and that as they were written they were quite legible. But turn to the second illustration. That is a reproduction of a translation into Hebrew, also by Mr. Miller, and written in the old Phœnician or Israelitic characters which were known to Lehi and his contemporaries. It contains seven pages of the American text of the Book of Mormon. It proves that even if these larger characters



Hebrew translation contained from Nephi II Ch I, 20 to Chapter III, 3 inclusive (about 14 and 3/4 pages)

Hebrew translation of 11 Nephi, Chapters 5:20 to 11:3 inclusive, (about 14 and 3/4 pages of the English version.)





very generous allowance for that space. Fifty printed pages would be equal to a little more than seven pages—four plates—if the Phœnician characters were used. Four plates, then, should be added to the 41 already mentioned, making the number of plates needed for the entire book that was translated 45.

*Hebrew Writing Requires Small Space.* This may sound incredible to some, but it is easily explained. The Hebrews of old did not write the vowels. They wrote only the consonants, and they did not leave much blank space between words and lines as we do. Nor did they need so many small words, as we do, to complete a sentence. Frequently their auxiliary words consisted of a single letter attached to the main word, either as a prefix or suffix. And, finally, they used many abbreviations. All this meant a great saving of space.<sup>4</sup>

We have noticed that the entire volume was four inches thick (according to Martin Harris), or about six inches (according to what Orson Pratt had heard). Let us take the smaller number as the more probable. Mr. Lamb has allowed 50 plates to an inch, or 200 plates to the four inches. One-third only was translated; that is, 66 plates, and a fraction. But we have demonstrated that the entire book including the lost pages, could have been written on 45 plates. If we

---

<sup>4</sup>It is well known that the subdivision of the Hebrew text of the Bible was not begun before the 13th century of our era. The Masoretic punctuation, including most of the vowels now in use to aid the student in pronouncing the words, was not introduced till some time between the 6th and 9th centuries. The separation of the text into words is not found in the oldest manuscripts. The square letters of the consonants were not employed before the 3rd century of our era.

allow 66, or even 50, we have ample space for a text engraved in large, legible characters.<sup>5</sup>

*Now, Regarding the Weight.* Thirty-five twenty-dollar gold pieces would about cover a surface 8 by 7 inches. To make a column four inches high, forty-eight such pieces would be needed. Consequently, thirty-five times forty-eight- twenty-dollar gold pieces, or 1,680 in all, would make up the dimensions of the plates, 8x7x4 inches. But a twenty-dollar gold piece weighs, as I am informed, 21½ pennyweights. That would make a total, if my figures are correct, of 123 pounds avoirdupois.

But from this estimate liberal deductions must be made. The plates were not pure gold. The plates of Nephi were made of "ore," and Moroni also mentions "ore" as the material of which his plates were made. (I Ne. 19:1; Morm. 8:5.) The "ore"—possibly a copper alloy—must have been considerably lighter in weight than the 23-karat gold of which a twenty-dollar piece is made. We cannot suppose that the plates fit as closely together as gold coins stacked up in columns. There must have been some space between each pair, especially if, as is probable, they were hammered<sup>6</sup> and not cast. Then again, allowance must be made for the metal cut away by the engraver, from each plate. Everything considered, the volume must have weighed considerably less than a hundred

---

<sup>5</sup>The first edition of the Book of Mormon, printed in Nauvoo, 1830 has 590 pages, 12:mo. The first European edition, Liverpool, 1841, reprinted from the second American edition, has 634 pages. The third American edition, Nauvoo, 1840, has 571 pages. The second European edition, Liverpool, 1849, has 563 pages. The American edition, 1922, has 522 pages.

<sup>6</sup>See Ex. 29:3: "And they did beat the gold into thin plates."

pounds, even on the supposition that the dimensions given are strictly accurate and not mere approximations.

*Another Calculation.* The subject of weight may also be approached from another angle. Let us suppose that the entire text was engraved on 45 plates, as I have shown to be possible. Forty-five would then be the number of the unsealed one-third and there would be 90 in the sealed two-thirds; that is, a total of 135 plates. But if 200 plates weigh 123 pounds, 135 would weigh a small fraction over 83 pounds. When the necessary reductions, pointed out in a previous paragraph, are made, the entire volume could not have weighed fifty pounds.

*Did the Prophet Have Custody of All the Plates?* Another question arises. Is it absolutely certain that the Prophet Joseph had charge of the sealed part of the volume, as well as of the part that was not sealed? That may be the general impression, but is it correct? Orson Pratt says:

“You recollect that when the Book of Mormon was translated from the plates, about two-thirds were sealed up, and Joseph was commanded not to break the seal; *that part of the record was hid up.*”<sup>7</sup>

The closing sentence of this paragraph, which I have underlined, seems to indicate that, according to the information Orson Pratt had, the sealed part was hidden somewhere when the translation of the other part was in progress. If so, who had charge of it? Where was it hidden?

---

<sup>7</sup>*Jour. of Dis.*, Vol. 3, p. 347.

If the Prophet Joseph had in his possession only the unsealed, third part of the volume, the argument against the credibility of the story, based on the supposed enormous weight of two hundred gold plates, rests on nothing more solid than an imaginary basis.

The plates that the prophet had in his possession were not heavier than that he, who was an unusually strong man, physically as well as mentally, could lift them and handle them.<sup>8</sup> That is the testimony of eye witnesses, and that testimony stands.

*Similar Objections to Bible Statements.* Curiously enough, at one time certain critics of the Bible used to raise objections to the Old Testament description of the Tabernacle furniture on the ground that gold was too heavy to handle. We are told that Bezaleel made an ark or box of wood, in which the Law was deposited. It was overlaid with pure gold "within and without." The cover of this box was a lid made of pure gold (Ex. 25:17; 37:6), 2½ cubits long and 1½ wide. That is, it was an immense gold plate 4 feet 3 inches by 2 feet 7 inches, or about 11 square feet in size. On this lid two cherubs were placed, one at each end. These figures were hammered of pure gold. Their wings covered the lid, and they must, therefore, have been of considerable size. This box, we are told, was carried by the priests before the camp of Israel during their wanderings, but the critics referred to used to tell us that that was impossible. The box with its solid gold lid and immense solid gold statues, its stone tablets, its gold rings

---

<sup>8</sup>*History of the Prophet Joseph* by his mother, Lucy Smith, pp. 85 and 105. The incident told must have been related by the prophet himself.

and staves was too heavy to handle, they said, except by the aid of machinery. But that kind of "criticism" is obsolete, whether applied to the Bible or Book of Mormon.

*Metal Plates not Unknown.* We have also been told that the ancient scribes never used metal plates for their records, and that, therefore, Laban could not have had any brass plates.

Ivory tablets were used by the ancient Greeks and Romans. They also used wooden tablets, beech or fir. Sometimes these were coated with wax, and the record was made with a "stylus." Two or more such tablets might be joined together by means of wire rings, like the Book of Mormon plates. Parchment made of skins of animals was a favorite material for important records, and vellum, or calf skin, was common in early days. But in Ex. 39:30 we read that the high priest wore a gold plate on his crown, on which certain words were engraved, and Jeremiah (17:1) exclaims: "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart." That proves beyond a question that the Israelites were familiar with engraved tablets, for otherwise the words of the prophet would have been unintelligible to them.