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Concerning the Brass Plates

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Abstract: In response to the objection that Israelites could not have engraved a record on brass plates, Brookbank shows examples in the Old Testament that indicate that they did in fact use brass in creating records (Isaiah 8:1-2 and Habakkuk 2:2). Brookbank argues that the brass plates used by Isaiah and Habakkuk are what became the brass plates that Lehi took to the Americas. The first part begins the series.

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"Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven" (PSALMS 85 : 11).

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CONCERNING THE BRASS PLATES.

BY THOMAS W. BROOKBANK.

THE writer had the privilege, during part of the time when President Hyrum M. Smith had charge of the European Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, of doing some missionary work among the people of the British Isles, and he has not forgotten that one of the objections which some of the opposers of this work then urged, with a good deal of vehemence, was the alleged fact that the ancient Israelites never did progress far enough in the finer arts to become capable of engraving artistically on metal plates, such as it is claimed in the Book of Mormon the Jewish Scriptures were recorded upon, and which were carried by a certain Israelite named Lehi to the Western Continent, about B. C. 600. It was asserted in particular that the Jews never did make use of brass plates upon which to record the word of God or anything else. From their point of view the Book of Mormon claim in this matter is worthy of ridicule only, and consequently the entire book must be condemned as a gross imposture. "How was it possible," they ask, "that the Israelites, while groaning in Egyptian bondage, could become proficient in any of the finer arts?"

That there is another side to this case shall be made manifest in the remarks that are to follow. We shall find that though the Israelites were oppressed by the Egyptians and held in servitude for several generations, they nevertheless did acquire a high degree of skill in the more refined arts, or some of them at least, and one of those arts was the engraving of records on plates of brass. The field that is to be covered in this undertaking is rather a wide one, and the entrance to it is found at the very beginning of the history of writing among the Israelites.

The first Biblical reference to material used by that people for writing upon is as follows: "O that my words were now written!

that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock forever" (Job 19: 23, 24).

Biblical commentators are of the opinion that three different kinds of writing materials are referred to in this quotation, and these are (1) papyri, (2) lead plates, and (3) rock pillars or tablets. According to the chronology in common use, the time involved is about B. C. 1,520, which is 31 years before the Israelites set out on their migration from Egypt for the land of Canaan. It thus becomes apparent that the art of writing and that of engraving on metal, etc., were known to the Israelites during the latter part, at least, of their term of bondage in Egypt. The circumstance that the book of Job is included among the inspired and sacred writings of the Israelites is about conclusive that the author of that book, as well as the principle personage mentioned in it, were Hebrews. The author, as well as Job himself, must have been prominent members of society in their day, and though almost certainly Hebrews, it is not assumed that the arts of writing and engraving on metal were *largely* practiced by the Israelites while in a condition of servitude. The present purpose is merely to make it apparent that these arts had been in use among the ancients in Mediterranean regions before the time of the Exodus, and that it is not possible to deny successfully that that knowledge in a practical way was possessed by the Hebrews.

Later in Israelitish history additional writing materials were parchment, vellum and basil. These were the prepared skins of sheep and goats, and when several skins were sewed together, end to end, they were called *books*, *rolls* or *sticks*. They got the latter name from the circumstance that the ends of the connected skins were fastened to sticks, or rollers, upon which the books were rolled or wound for convenient handling when being read.

We now come to something quite definite which manifests that the Hebrews were skilled in the arts mentioned; for before the year which witnessed their departure from Egypt came to an end, the Lord gave a commandment which required the exercise of the engraver's art, and one may be sure that work of an inferior quality would not have been acceptable in this instance. The command is in these words: "And thou shalt make a plate of pure gold, and grave upon it, like the engraving of a signet, Holiness to the Lord" (Exodus 28: 36).

It is the height of folly for one to assume that while the Israelites were on the march in a desert, and undoubtedly deprived of many facilities of doing fine work which they had previously enjoyed while in Egypt, they *all at once*, when confronted with a demand from the Lord for doing some fine work in the engraver's art, acquired the necessary proficiency to neatly fashion the band of gold and engrave the words on it to the Divine acceptance. When one reads about the extraordinarily fine

work which was displayed in the structure of the Tabernacle and its furnishings (all wrought in the desert, too), one is amazed to find that men claiming to be intelligently informed respecting the early history of the Israelites, so disregard leading facts in the matter as to contend that, in the early days of that people, they did not know enough to make metal plates and engrave them. What is more likely than that, since the Egyptians up to only a few years previous to this time, could have had no thought of being compelled to give the Israelites their freedom, they made some of the more intelligent of the Hebrews do much of their finer work, while the masses were compelled to do the drudgery? In the first few verses of Exodus, chapter 31, it is stated that they were able to "devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass;" and that they understood the cutting and setting of precious stones, the carving of wood, and could "work in all manner of workmanship." The different kinds of fine work which they executed while in the desert is proof that Moses did not exaggerate their artistic abilities when he wrote the chapter of Exodus last cited.

The next quotation from Scripture relating to the use of metal for recording purposes is found in Isaiah 8: 1, 2, and is as follows: "Moreover the Lord said unto me, Take thee a great roll, and write in it with a man's pen concerning Maher-shalal-hash-baz. And I took unto me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah."

Commenting on a part of the first verse of this quotation, Dr. Adam Clarke, whose marked ability as an interpreter of Hebrew can not justly be called in question by any one, gives us some very interesting information, to say the least. To begin with, this learned divine renders the words in the quoted text, "Take thee a great roll," as follows: "Take thee a large mirror." Then to justify the change in the reading as he thus proposes, he gives the word in the original Hebrew text which is translated "roll" in English, and says that it is not derived from one which signifies *to roll*; but from a verb almost identical in orthography with the other, and which has the meaning of "*to render clear and bright by rubbing; to polish.*" Moreover, after spelling out in English the pronunciation of the Hebrew word involved, namely: *gillayon*, he says that "therefore, according to this derivation (*gillayon*) is not a roll or volume, but may very well signify a *polished tablet of metal*, such as was anciently used for a mirror. The Chaldee paraphrast renders it by *luach*, a *tablet*, and the same word, though somewhat differently pointed * * * the Chaldee paraphrast *and* the rabbins render a *mirror* (in Isa. 3: 23). The mirrors of the Israelitish women were made of brass finely polished (Exod. 38: 8); from which place it likewise appears that what they used was little hand mirrors which they carried with them even when they assembled at the door of the

Tabernacle. I (Dr. Clarke) have a metalline mirror found in Herulanenm which is not above three inches square. The prophet is commanded to take a *mirror*, or *brazen, polished table*, not like these little hand mirrors; but a large one; large enough for him to engrave upon it in deep and lasting characters * * * with a workman's graving tool, the prophecy which he was to deliver * * * and that it might be done with the greater solemnity, and to preclude all doubt of the real delivery of the prophecy before the event, he calls witnesses to attest the recording of it. The words were to be written with a man's pen: i.e., though the prophecy be given in the vision of God, yet the writing must be real: the writing must be transcribed on the great roll" (brass plates, or mirrors) "that it may be read and publicly consulted" (Dr. Clarke's Commentary, Isa. 8: 1).

In the course of the remarks made by Dr. Clarke he referred to a certain class of Jewish teachers and writers called Paraphrasts; and a few remarks concerning them and their work is in place. While the Israelites were in Babylonish captivity they made use quite largely of the Chaldee or Aramaean forms of speech, and the result was that when they returned to their native land there were many of them who could not fully understand the Hebrew, in which language by far the greater part of their Scriptures was then written. There was, therefore, a necessity that an explanation of the meaning of the original, in some instances, should be given so as to make the sense of the text understandable and clear to all, and it is owing to this fact that we have the original of the "great roll" upon which Isaiah was commanded to write his prophecy explained as *a polished plate of brass*, or *a mirror*. The interpretations thus put upon the Scriptures by the learned Israelite paraphrasts were called *traditions*, and were handed down by word of mouth from one generation to another until in the first century before, and in the century which followed the beginning of the Christian era, they were committed to writing in rolls or books called Targums. Jonathan ben Uzziel on the prophecies and Onkelos on the Pentateuch are the most noted Targum writers, and their works are of great value as aids in the correct interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures, as learned Hebrew scholars inform us.

The evidence which is supplied in the remarks of Dr. Clarke, so far as they relate to the meaning of the original Hebrew for the "great roll," together with the facts which are found in the writings of the paraphrasts, manifest plainly, in our humble view, that the ancient Israelites did make use of brass plates as well as other materials upon which to record the word of God. If one is disposed to deny the legitimacy of this conclusion, how can he account satisfactorily for the fact that brass plates are spoken of at all in connection with the writing of ancient Scriptures?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)