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The Rings That Bound the Gold Plates Together

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The Rings That Bound the Gold Plates Together

Eyewitnesses to the Book of Mormon plates described in consistent terms the rings that bound the gold plates into a single volume. The rings were three in number and apparently made of the same material as the plates themselves. While our attention naturally focuses on the plates and the translation of the text engraved upon them, the rings may offer another subtle but telling confirmation of the record's ancient origin.

Most of the people on record as having seen the gold plates referred to the rings without commenting on their shape. One exception is an 1878 interview with John Whitmer, one of the Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon. In confirming the physical reality of seeing and handling the gold plates, he stated that the plates were joined together "in three rings, each one in the shape of a D with the straight line towards the centre."¹

This unusual detail was confirmed by his brother David Whitmer, who in 1877 at age 72 related that a heavenly messenger had granted his mother, Mary Musselman Whitmer, a view of the plates. In relating the incident, David mentioned to the reporter that his mother had observed how the plates were bound. His statement that "they were fastened with rings thus" was followed by a drawing of a D-shaped ring.² David Whitmer, of course, had also seen the plates himself in 1829 as one of the Three Witnesses and would surely have corrected or otherwise commented on his mother's description had it been different from his own experience. Thus casually and perhaps inadvertently, Mary and David Whitmer become second and third sources for clarifying the shape of the rings.

Finally, there is a confirmatory account from 1831 in which William E. McLellan repeats what

Hyrum Smith had told him: "The plates were . . . connected with rings in the shape of the letter D, which facilitated the opening and shutting of the book."³

For many people the natural assumption, in 1830 as much as today, would easily be that the rings were a circular O shape, as suggested by the word *ring* itself. Indeed, many depictions of the gold plates over the years have shown them bound by circular rings. It is only from eyewitness testimony from a few of the small number of people privileged to see the plates that we know the rings were D-shaped. Why is that shape significant?

Simply this: the D shape offers stability by allowing the leaves to stack vertically against the straight side of the rings. Although it occupies much the same space, a D-shaped ring also offers a full 50 percent more storage capacity than a circular ring (and 20 to 25 percent more storage capacity than a slanted semicircular shape). To the Book of Mormon prophets who labored to inscribe their records on metal plates, space was clearly an important consideration. D-shaped rings offered them a means to keep the maximum number of plates together.

The same principle governs the loose-leaf binders used today. Their history is instructive. The first loose-leaf binder patent was not filed until 1854, with the first two-ring binders advertised for sale in 1899. Two improvements to the basic design followed. Within a few decades the use of three rings rather than two proved to be a more stable design and became standard. These early designs, however, used circular or oval-shaped rings. Only in the last few decades has the improved capacity of D-shaped rings been recognized and made available for loose-leaf binders.⁴

Joseph Smith displayed plates that were securely bound by *three rings* (not two or four) constructed in what we now know is the *most*


& the next Morning Davids

Mother Saw the Person at the shed

and he took the Plates from A

Box & Showed them to her

She Said that they Were fastened

with Rings thus  he turned

the leaves over this was a satisfaction

to her.

In an 1877 interview, David Whitmer related his mother's description of the rings that bound the gold plates.

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efficient shape.⁵ He could not have known either of these facts in 1829 from the materials in his environment or from people who may have had greater familiarity with libraries or materials storage. Nor could he have been informed by the finds of other ancient records, as none were then known to be bound by rings. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the only other ancient metal record bound by rings so far known also has D-shaped rings and dates to about 600 BC.⁶

As with the simple, unadorned testimonies of those who witnessed the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, these new and quite unlikely incidental details give new meaning to the phrase “the ring of truth.” 📖 —Warren P. Aston, independent Book of Mormon researcher

Notes

1. John Whitmer interview by P. Wilhelm Poulson, reported in the *Deseret News* of 6 August 1878.
2. David Whitmer interview by Edward Stevenson, 22–23 December 1877, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
3. Reported in the *Huron Reflector* (Norwalk, OH), 31 October 1831. See the discussion in Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Attempts to Redefine the Experiences of the

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the current Book of Mormon does preserve telltale aspects of ancient language (e.g., Hebraisms, chiasmus), the old assumptions of source-language carryover do not hold in every instance. The picture is more complicated.

For one thing, early production practices spawned more transcription errors than previously recognized. A case in point is Mosiah 17:13, where the description of Abinadi’s execution should, in order to correct a scribal mistake, read *scorched* instead of *scourged*: “they took him and bound him and scorched his skin with fagots.”¹ Further, the evidence increasingly supports the theory that the original vocabulary of the Book of Mormon dates from the 1500s and 1600s, not the

1. Skousen follows the spelling *fagots* rather than *faggots* per modern practice, as set forth, for example, in *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed.

Eight Witnesses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 30.

4. E-mail correspondence with M. Frankena, curator, Early Office Museum, London, February 2006. Any readers who are aware of D-ring technology in securing metal plates together in the early 1800s or earlier are encouraged to contact the Maxwell Institute.
5. The reported substantial size of the rings is also consistent with what common sense would require to secure a volume reported to weigh some 40 to 60 pounds. See Kirk B. Henrichsen, “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/1 (2001): 16–21, which collects the accounts of those who saw the plates.
6. Six small gold plates unearthed over 60 years ago in Bulgaria feature D-shaped rings and have been dated to about 600 BC. See the report “Etruscan Gold Book from 600 B.C. Discovered” and the photograph in *Insights* 23/5 (2003): 1, 6. A gold book from Tehran, Iran, of seemingly ancient date but of uncertain authenticity comprises eight gold sheets bound by four small rings of indeterminate shape (efforts to date to verify the shape of the rings have been fruitless). See the report and photograph in “Another Gold Book Found,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/2 (2005): 65. Perhaps the closest archaeological match to the Book of Mormon plates is the Darius II plates, dating to fourth-century-BC Persia and housed in a stone box when discovered in 1933. While the size and composition of the metal leaves, as well as the stone box, closely match that of the Book of Mormon record, the inscribed plates of Darius were not bound by rings.

1800s of Joseph Smith’s time. That is, the vocabulary agrees with the language of Early Modern English yet is not identical to the vocabulary of the King James Bible. In the English of the 1500s the verb *scorch* (not *scourge*) was used to describe people being burned at the stake. So an odd phrasing long thought to describe a strange execution practice in ancient times turns out to be a simple scribal error that, once corrected, smooths out a “wrinkle” in the text.

Such findings support Skousen’s view that the translation process was tightly controlled—that is, the text was revealed to Joseph Smith word for word, and even letter by letter (he could see, for instance, the English spelling of the names), rather than interpreted solely through his own faculties and expressed exclusively in his own language. If accurate, this understanding intensifies the miraculous dimension implicit in Isaiah’s description of the coming forth of the Book of