

# Hefted and Handled

## *Tangible Interactions with Book of Mormon Objects*

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In his 1839 history, Joseph Smith said that he found the Book of Mormon plates “under a ~~stone~~ stone of considerable size.” The plates were “deposited in a stone box” along with “the Urim and Thummin and the Breastplate as stated by the messenger.”<sup>1</sup> These plates would be unearthed by Joseph Smith on September 22, 1827, and be carried from Manchester, New York, to Harmony, Pennsylvania, where Joseph would begin to translate the plates in the winter of 1828 and produce the sacred text called the Book of Mormon. Although Joseph begins his narrative of the Book of Mormon’s origin by telling us of actual physical relics, some dismiss the physical reality and factual historicity of the Book of Mormon record by consigning the text to the status of an extraordinary work of mystical mythology.<sup>2</sup> They claim the Book of Mormon could be inspired truth—a supernatural, magical work of revealed religious fiction—yet still not be factual, historical truth. However, this position overlooks Joseph Smith’s foundation story of the physical origins of the Book of Mormon: actual relics hefted and handled, touched and transported, from one place to another and by one person to another. Joseph Smith did not describe the coming forth of the Book of Mormon the way he described many of his revelations found in the Doctrine and Covenants: as inspired words of the Lord that came to his mind and that

he then dictated to a scribe.<sup>3</sup> No, Joseph said the Book of Mormon came forth from a nearby hill, by removing dirt, using a lever to lift a large stone, and removing actual engraved plates and sacred interpreters for the translation of its inscriptions. The Book of Mormon text didn't just pass through Joseph's trance-induced revelatory mind; its palpable relics passed through a working frock, hollowed log, cooper's shop, linen napkin, wooden chest, fireplace hearth, and barrel of beans. As historian Terryl Givens has insightfully deduced, "This continual, extensive, and prolonged engagement with a tangible, visible, grounding artifact is not compatible with a theory that makes him an inspired writer reworking the stuff of his own dreams into a product worthy of the name scripture. . . . The story of the gold plates could not be fanciful mythology and the Book of Mormon still be scripture."<sup>4</sup>

It is logically inconsistent to claim that Joseph Smith disingenuously contrived the explicit origin story of the Book of Mormon and then expected its readers to implicitly accept the very story and teachings that the book contains. How can one accept Joseph Smith's revelation of truth if the story that produced it was a complete fabrication? Either the physical origin story of the Book of Mormon as told by Joseph Smith is true, or it is not. The truthfulness of its text is inextricably linked to its inception report.

The purpose of this article is to examine multiple historical accounts of persons who interacted with actual, physical, tangible objects related to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—persons who could substantiate the reality of these origin objects. Taken collectively, these material experiences with Book of Mormon relics provide compelling evidence to the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's account of the Book of Mormon's ancient origins. Building on prior research by Andrew Hedges<sup>5</sup> and research by Michael MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat,<sup>6</sup> this paper will describe multiple independent accounts from perhaps the most material time period of the book's coming forth: the protection period from when the plates were unearthed in September of 1827 in Manchester, New York, to when they began to be translated in early winter of 1828 in Harmony, Pennsylvania.

## TAKEN FROM A STONE BOX

After four years of anxious personal preparation following Joseph Smith's First Vision, the time had come for Joseph to unearth and retrieve the Nephite record. Around midnight on the evening of September 21, 1827, Joseph asked his mother, Lucy, "if [she] had a chest with a lock and key"<sup>7</sup> to store the plates in once he retrieved them, but she did not have anything to

offer him. Lucy noticed that Joseph's wife, Emma, was in her riding apparel, and although Joseph didn't mention it specifically, Lucy deduced that he was taking Emma and leaving to get the plates. Without obtaining consent,<sup>8</sup> Joseph took Joseph Knight's horse and wagon, and he and Emma left for the Hill Cumorah. Leaving Emma at the bottom of the hill to wait, Joseph went to retrieve the plates from their ancient burial place.

Often overlooked, the stone box from which the plates were retrieved is one of the first physical evidences of Joseph's origin story of the Book of Mormon plates and text. Joseph described the box in which the plates and interpreters were interred: "The box in which they lay was formed by laying stones together in some kind of cement, in the bottom of the box were laid two stones crossways of the box, and on these stones lay the plates and the other things with them."<sup>9</sup> Meeting the angel Moroni at the site of the stone box, and after having received a sacred charge from the angel that Joseph was now responsible for the plates' care, Joseph removed the plates from their tomb. Because he had not yet prepared a secure place for the plates at home, he initially stored the plates in a hollowed-out birch log on the hill.<sup>10</sup> A few days later, after having obtained a wooden chest from his brother Hyrum in which to secure the plates, Joseph returned to the Hill Cumorah and took the plates home.

Ironically, while much of Joseph's later persecution may have arisen out of others doubting the existence and possession of golden plates, originally the difficulty was due to the exact opposite: certain persons were convinced he had actually retrieved the record.<sup>11</sup> Part of their certainty was due to their interaction with the place where the plates were buried. Willard Chase and Samuel Lawrence, two local friends of Joseph's and associates in some of his previous treasure-seeking ventures, were particularly attuned to Joseph's retrieval of the plates. According to an account by Willard Chase, before Joseph obtained the record, he had taken Samuel Lawrence to the Hill Cumorah and shown him the spot where the Book of Mormon plates were concealed in the stone box. Lawrence asked Joseph "if he had ever discovered anything with the plates of gold; he said no; he then asked him to look in his stone, to see if there was anything with them. He looked, and said there was nothing; he told him to look again, and see if there was not a large pair of specks with the plates; he looked and soon saw a pair of spectacles, the same with which Joseph says he translated the Book of Mormon."<sup>12</sup> Although portions of Chase's account must be read skeptically, Joseph Knight Sr. shared a similar story in his reminiscence, saying Samuel

Lawrence “had Bin to the hill and knew about the things in the hill and he was trying to obtain them.”<sup>13</sup>

Lawrence and other local treasure hunters, such as Willard Chase, are likely some of those who, because they had seen the place from which the plates came forth, later convinced an inquiring man named David Whitmer that Joseph had obtained the plates from the hill. David Whitmer would later remember:

I had conversations with several young men who said that Joseph Smith had certainly golden plates, and that before he attained them he had promised to share with them, but had not done so, and they were very much incensed with him. Said I, ‘how do you know that Joe Smith has the plates?’ They replied: ‘*we saw the plates [place] in the hill that he took them out of just as he described it to us before he obtained them.*’ These parties were so positive in their statements that I began to believe there must be some foundation for the stories then in circulation all over that part of the country.<sup>14</sup>

In another interview Whitmer told a reporter that “the community in which he [Whitmer] lived . . . was alive with excitement in regard to Smith’s finding a great treasure, and they informed him that they knew that Smith had the plates, *as they had seen the place that he had taken them from, on the hill Cumorah.*”<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after Joseph had obtained the plates, Martin Harris and two others also went to the Hill Cumorah to “hunt for some more [stone] boxes.” While this is a later reminiscence and he doesn’t state with certainty whether or not this was the very box the Book of Mormon plates were removed from, Harris claimed that “indeed we found a stone box” that he and the other two persons were excited about. After unsuccessfully trying to remove the box from the hill, they took a crowbar and “broke one corner off the box.” Harris concluded, “Sometime that box will be found, and you will see the corner broken off, then you will know I have told you the truth. Again Brethren as sure as you are standing here and see me just that sure did I see the angel with the golden plates.”<sup>16</sup>

The stone box from the Hill Cumorah was also apparently left exposed for the display of residents and visitors to Palmyra for decades. In 1893 Elder Edward Stevenson wrote that during a trip to Palmyra “early on a summer’s morning in the year 1870,” he had been shown where the stone box once was by a local resident who lived near the Hill Cumorah. Stevenson said, “Questioning him closely he [the local] stated that he had seen

some good sized flat stones that had rolled down and lay near the bottom of the hill. This had occurred after the contents of the box had been removed and these stones were doubtless the ones that formerly composed the box. I felt a strong desire to see these ancient relics and told him I would be much pleased to have him inform me where they were to be found. He stated that they had long since been taken away.”<sup>17</sup> Testimonies and affidavits of local Palmyra residents such as this man, Martin Harris, Samuel Lawrence, and others corroborate Joseph Smith’s testimony of the Book of Mormon relics being found and removed from a stone box he unearthed on the Hill Cumorah.

## RESPONSIBLE FOR A RELIC

Returning to the evening of Joseph’s retrieval of the plates from the Hill Cumorah, Joseph recounted that the angel Moroni gave him a strict charge regarding their care. Joseph recorded, “The same heavenly messenger delivered them up to me with this charge that I should be responsible for them. That if I should let them go carelessly or through any neglect of mine I should be cut off, but that if I would use all my endeavours to preserve them untill he (the messenger) called should call for them, they should be protected.”<sup>18</sup> Because he had nowhere to protect the plates at home, Joseph left them hidden in a Cumorah birch tree “3 miles”<sup>19</sup> from the Smith home and went west to Macedon to take a job digging a well in order to earn money to have a wooden chest made in which to secure the plates.

While Joseph was gone, word apparently spread that he had obtained the record. Samuel Lawrence, Willard Chase, and others had gathered a group of about a dozen men (including a conjurer from sixty to seventy miles away)<sup>20</sup> to find the place where Joseph had secreted the plates. Joseph Smith Sr. learned of their plans and alerted Emma, and she rode on a stray horse to Macedon to alert Joseph that the plates were in danger. Joseph miraculously knew of Emma’s coming and went out and met her on the road. Upon hearing the plates may be in danger, Joseph consulted the “Urim and Thummim, and saw that the Record was as yet safe; nevertheless, he concluded to return with his wife.”<sup>21</sup> Upon arriving in Palmyra, Joseph went to the Hill Cumorah to retrieve the record, still dressed in his linen working frock. Joseph retrieved the plates from the hollowed log, wrapped them in his frock, and began on his way home through the woods with the record. He was attacked three times on his way home, dislocating his thumb fighting off one of the attackers. Arriving at his parents’ home, according

to Joseph's sister Katherine, Joseph "came in nearly exhausted, carrying the package of gold plates . . . clasped to his side with his left hand and arm, and his right hand was badly bruised."<sup>22</sup> Family friend Josiah Stowell, who was visiting the Smiths, reported that Joseph then handed him the plates, wrapped in his linen frock, through an open window.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Martin Harris recounted that upon arriving home, Joseph "handed the plates in at the window," although according to his recollection, the plates "were received from him by his mother [Lucy Smith]."<sup>24</sup>

## JOSIAH STOWELL, THE FIRST UNINTENTIONAL WITNESS

Josiah Stowell claimed he was the "first person that took the Plates out of [Joseph Smith's] hands the morning [he] brought them in."<sup>25</sup> Thus Josiah Stowell would have been the first witness to validate Joseph's claims of obtaining tangible plates. However, although Stowell's experience hefting the plates as they were passed to him—feeling of their weight, mass, and shape—constitutes a witness in itself, Josiah Stowell also claimed that he *saw* (albeit unintentionally) the exposed plates as they were passed to him by Joseph. Historians Michael MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat summarize what happened:

In the summer of 1830, after Joseph Smith was charged with disorderly conduct, Stowell was called by the defense and sworn in as a witness. He testified under oath that he saw the plates the day Joseph first brought them home. As Joseph passed them through the window, Stowell caught a glimpse of the plates as a portion of the linen was pulled back. Stowell gave the court the dimensions of the plates and explained that they consisted of gold leaves with characters written on each sheet. The printed transcript of the trial read: "witness saw a corner of it; it resembled a stone of a greenish caste." Because Stowell also mentioned in his statement that the record was made of plates of gold, it is difficult to know what he meant by this description. He may have seen the band that sealed two-thirds of the plates together, which may have been made of copper that had oxidized over the years and turned green. Alternatively, he may have seen the breastplate, which could have also been made of copper and appeared green from oxidation. In any case, the point Stowell made to the court was that the plates were real and that he had seen and felt them.<sup>26</sup>

Stowell thus becomes the first unintentional witness, having an experience somewhat like that which the formal Eight Witnesses later had as they were allowed to heft and see the plates.

## TANGIBLE AS OILCLOTHS

Others soon reported having tangible experiences with the plates or other relics Joseph had recovered from the Hill Cumorah. Some few days after Joseph brought the plates home, his mother said that her son called her down from her upstairs work on some oilcloths. Lucy reported, “I finally concluded to go down, and see what he wanted, upon which he handed me the breast-plate spoken of in his history. It was wrapped in a thin muslin handkerchief, so thin that I could see the glistening metal, and ascertain its proportions without any difficulty.” Lucy proceeded to describe the breastplate:

It was concave on one side, and convex on the other, and extended from the neck downwards, as far as the centre of the stomach of a man of extraordinary size. It had four straps of the same material, for the purpose of fastening it to the breast, two of which ran back to go over the shoulders, and the other two were designed to fasten to the hips. They were just the width of two of my fingers, (for I measured them,) and they had holes in the end of them, to be convenient in fastening. After I had examined it, Joseph placed it in the chest with the Urim and Thummim.<sup>27</sup>

Lucy also reported that she saw the Urim and Thummim, or Nephite interpreters. According to her, on the evening Joseph obtained the plates he handed her the spectacles wrapped only in a thin silk handkerchief through which she could see and discern their shape. “I’ve got a key [the Nephite interpreters],” Joseph told his mother when he came back that evening, and she “took the article of which he spoke into [her] hands.”<sup>28</sup> Having examined the object, she later described the seer stones as two “three-cornered” stones set in “silver bows,” connected with each other like “old fashioned spectacles.” Lucy’s experiences and accounts are yet another powerful witness to the tangible reality of Joseph’s Book of Mormon origin story. Handling, feeling, measuring, and describing the breastplate and interpreters were not supernatural experiences, explained away by spiritual phenomena, but were as real and tactile as the very oilcloths Lucy had painted only moments before she handled these relics.

## COOPER'S SHOP, HEARTHSTONES, AND BEANS

Joseph was warned by the angel Moroni when he took charge of the plates that people would seek to take them from him and that he would need to use all his efforts to preserve them. The Prophet's history relates:

I soon found out the reason why I had received such strict charges to keep them safe and why it was that the messenger had said that when I had done what was required at my hand, he would call for them, for no sooner was it known that I had them than the most strenuous exertions were used to get them from me. Every stratagem that could be invented was resorted to for that purpose. The persecution became more bitter and severe than before, and multitudes were on the alert continually to get them from me if possible but by the wisdom of God they remained safe in my hands.<sup>29</sup>

Joseph's exertions to keep the plates safe are another example of the palpable reality of the objects obtained from the Hill Cumorah. Not long after bringing the plates home, Joseph was alerted through the Urim and Thummim of a company of men who were coming to find the plates. Joseph and others<sup>30</sup> pulled up the hearthstones from the family fireplace and dug a hole of sufficient size to bury the plates in. They then replaced the hearthstones to conceal what they had done, finishing just before the group of men arrived. According to Joseph Knight Sr., shortly after this Samuel Lawrence and "a grate Rodsman" came to Joseph Smith Sr.'s home and tried to bargain with Joseph Smith "to go shares" with them on the plates. When Joseph refused, the rodsman (whom Brigham Young later described as a wicked man having "possessed as much talent as any man that walked on the American soil")<sup>31</sup> "took out his Rods and hild [held] them up and they pointed Dow[n] to the harth whare they ware hid." The rodsman proclaimed, "It is under that harth."<sup>32</sup> No record exists about what transpired next, but although the rodsman had correctly identified where they were concealed, Joseph obviously succeeded in keeping the plates safe from his hands.

On another occasion, Joseph was apprised of another attempt by a mob to come and take the plates. He took the record from the wooden box, wrapped the plates in some clothes, and hid them in some flax in the second-story loft of the cooper's shop across the road from his parents' home. In order to divert the mob, Joseph nailed shut the box that had housed the plates and buried it in the floorboards of the ground level of the shop. That evening, the mob (following instructions given by Sally Chase after looking through her green seer stone) came and searched around the entire Smith



property, and at Chase's instructions searched the cooper's shop. The next morning, Lucy Mack Smith later recalled, "we found the floor of the cooper's shop torn up, and the box which was laid under it shivered in pieces,"<sup>33</sup> but the plates were safe in the loft.

Another concealment of and tangible interaction with the plates came a few months later, when, to escape the harassment they were experiencing at Joseph Smith Sr.'s home in Manchester, Joseph and Emma Smith took up Emma's father's offer to live with him on his farm in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Joseph and Emma would make the move to Harmony in December of 1827. Their plans to relocate became known to a growing mob, who threatened Joseph that "he should never leave until he had shown the plates."<sup>34</sup> Fearful of being accosted by the mob and having his family's property searched until the plates were found, Joseph nailed the plates up in a wooden box and hid them in a barrel of beans, filling it a third of the way, depositing the plates, and then covering them over by filling up the rest of the barrel. Interestingly, Martin Harris, along with Joseph's brother-in-law Alva Hale, may have had a tangible interaction with the plates here, since Alva had come from Harmony to drive Joseph and Emma in his wagon. Although it is uncertain that Alva hefted or handled the box containing the plates, Harris claimed he personally helped Joseph move the box into the barrel of beans.<sup>35</sup> Those who helped Joseph secrete the plates and protect them—removing hearth stones and covering a wrapped relic, as well as loading it into a barrel of beans—provide additional accounts and proofs of a tangible record that had actually, not mystically, been entrusted to Joseph Smith to protect and eventually translate.

## HEFTING THE PLATES

Some years before Joseph obtained the Book of Mormon plates, Joseph Smith Sr. had mentioned confidentially to Martin Harris that his son was seeking to obtain from God plates buried in the hill.<sup>36</sup> Although open to the idea, upon hearing that Joseph Smith had obtained a treasure from the Hill Cumorah, Martin Harris initially suggested that perhaps he merely had discovered an "old brass kettle,"<sup>37</sup> but not a divine record. After obtaining the plates, Joseph sent his mother to the Harrises to elicit Martin's support in the translation. A few days later, Martin's wife, Lucy, came to the Smiths' home and questioned Joseph about the record, requesting to see the plates, for which, if Joseph consented, she would lend him financial support. Joseph declined, telling Mrs. Harris that he couldn't show them to her, to which

she responded, “Now, Joseph, are you not telling me a lie? Can you look full in my eye, and say before God, that you have in reality found a Record, as you pretend?”<sup>38</sup> Joseph later provided for Lucy Harris and her daughter a similar physical witness of the plates he offered to others: he let them lift the wooden box that contained the plates. Martin Harris recalled that his “daughter said, they were about as much as she could lift. . . . My wife said they were very heavy.”<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after his wife’s experience,<sup>40</sup> Martin Harris also received a tangible witness of the gold plates, hefting the box containing the plates at the Smith home. A few days after his wife’s visit, Martin arrived at the Smith home and questioned various members of the family independently to verify the story of the plates. Later in the day, after Joseph had given Martin his account of finding the plates, Joseph allowed Martin the same experience he had given Martin’s wife and daughter a few days earlier, giving him the box with the plates inside. Martin recalled, “While at Mr. Smith’s I hefted the plates, and I knew from the heft that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead. I left Mr. Smith’s about eleven o’clock and went home. I retired to my bedroom and prayed God to show me concerning these things, and I covenanted that if it was his work and he would show me so, I would put forth my best ability to bring it before the world. He then showed me that it was his work.”<sup>41</sup> Harris stated in an 1859 interview that another man, apparently Alvah Beman, or “Old Mr. Beman” (who helped Joseph hide the plates and provided a box for them), also had the privilege of hefting the plates in the box, relating to Martin Harris that “he heard them jink, but he was not permitted to see them.”<sup>42</sup> In that same interview, Harris stated that he “hefted the plates many times, and should think they weighed forty or fifty pounds.”<sup>43</sup>

## THUMBING AND FEELING THE PLATES

The Harrises and Mr. Beman were not the only ones to have tangible interaction with the plates. Many members of Joseph Smith’s immediate family recall also having physical contact and other sensory experiences with the Book of Mormon record. Joseph Smith’s little sister Katherine reported that on the day Joseph brought the plates home he handed them to her.<sup>44</sup> On another occasion she said that when cleaning in the Smith home, she “saw a package on the table containing the gold plates,” which she picked up to judge the weight, finding them “heavy like gold.” However, Katherine’s experience moved beyond those who hefted the plates in the box. She said

that through the package of cloth she “rippled her fingers up the edge of the plates and felt that they were separate metal plates and heard the tinkle of sound that they made.”<sup>45</sup> Her witness of tangible plates moved from simply lifting to the senses of physical touch and sound.

Additionally, Joseph’s little brother William, who was a teenager at the time, also recounted having palpable interaction with the Book of Mormon plates. William later wrote that he “hefted the plates as they lay on the table wrapped in an old frock or jacket in which Joseph had brought them home.” William’s experience was almost identical to that of his sister Katherine. He reported that he too had a tactile and auditory witness of the plates, recounting that he “had thumbed them through the cloth and ascertained that they were thin sheets of some kind of metal.”<sup>46</sup>

Other than Joseph Smith, the person who had the most interaction with the tangible reality of the plates was the Prophet’s wife, Emma Smith. She later recalled that after Joseph obtained the record, the plates “lay in a box under our bed for months but I never felt at liberty to look at them.”<sup>47</sup> In a later interview with her son Joseph III, Emma recounted that when she and Joseph arrived in Harmony, Pennsylvania, she had given Joseph a small linen tablecloth to wrap the plates in. Emma explained that “the plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment,” wrapped in this cloth.<sup>48</sup> She also recalled, “I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.”<sup>49</sup> Although some of Emma’s answers on other topics in this interview are contrary to the historical record,<sup>50</sup> Emma’s description of her tactile and auditory experience with the plates is remarkably consistent with William’s and Katherine’s descriptions.

Emma also moved the plates around in her Harmony home, as her son Joseph III remembered: “My mother told me that she . . . would lift and move [the plates] when she swept and dusted the room and furniture.”<sup>51</sup> Although it would seem Emma naturally desired to view the plates (see Doctrine and Covenants 25:4), her experiences were more than sufficient for her witness of their reality. She told her son: “I knew that he [Joseph] had them, and was not specially curious about them. . . . I did not attempt to handle the plates, other than I have told you, nor uncover them to look at them. I was satisfied that it was the work of God, and therefore did not feel it to be necessary to do so.”<sup>52</sup>

Another tactile experience with the plates is described in the testimony of Joseph's father-in-law, Isaac Hale. Joseph and Isaac had a strained relationship owing to Mr. Hale's disapproval of both Joseph's money-digging past and his marriage to Emma.<sup>53</sup> Upon returning to Harmony after eloping with Emma, according to Isaac Hale, Joseph had sworn to him that he had given up his treasure-searching past and that he intended "to work hard for a living."<sup>54</sup> A year into their marriage Joseph and Emma left Palmyra, New York, to live in a small home located on the Hale property in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Upon their arrival, Isaac Hale heard that Joseph had brought "a wonderful book of Plates down with them." Suspicious of Joseph because of his past claims, Isaac doubted the reality of Joseph's obtaining the Book of Mormon plates and confronted him about it. Joseph, under the sacred command given him of God through the angel Moroni to show the plates to nobody except whom God should command, but presumably wanting to allay his new father-in-law's suspicions and convince him that he indeed had an ancient record, offered to let Isaac Hale lift the wooden box containing the plates, just as he had let Lucy Harris, Martin Harris, and Alva Beaman do. Isaac Hale recounted, "I was allowed to feel the weight of the box, and they gave me to understand, that the book of plates was then in the box—into which, however, I was not allowed to look."<sup>55</sup>

Although this experience did not satisfy Isaac Hale as it had others,<sup>56</sup> it is nonetheless yet another example of someone who had a physical interaction with the tangible golden plates. Taking the collective experiences together of the many who did heft, handle, touch, feel, and ripple the plates and hear their metallic rustle during the protection period—along with the eleven formal witnesses who later saw the open plates—one is led to logically deduce, as did one scholar, that *at minimum* "what emerges as alone indisputable is the fact that Joseph Smith [did] possess a set of metal plates."<sup>57</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While none of the individual accounts related herein affirms single-handedly the certitude of Joseph's having obtained a sacred record (let alone of translating it correctly), the multiple independently recorded experiences suggest with convincing evidence the existence of the tangible Book of Mormon plates and relics. Descriptions and witnesses of stone boxes from the Hill Cumorah, multiple persons who hefted the plates as they lay inside assorted wooden containers, and those who felt, traced, and outlined the shape of the plates and breastplate or Urim and Thummim through various cloth

coverings—never mind the visible and tangible witness of the plates that would come from the eleven formal eyewitnesses of the Book of Mormon—indicate indisputable physicality with respect to the sacred record’s origin.

Moreover, Joseph Smith never explained the Book of Mormon as a purely spiritual production of an imaginary people given to teach divine truths. Rather, he repeatedly and consistently declared that the Book of Mormon was an inspired translation done through the “gift, and power of God”<sup>58</sup> of a literal ancient record taken from a stone box from a nearby hill—actual plates created and recorded and preserved by historical prophets and physically entrusted to his care, plates that he really did hide, conceal, and protect and that others really did have tangible experiences with.<sup>59</sup> The Lord has revealed that the translation of that record is true (see Doctrine and Covenants 17:6). The experiences, records, and accounts of various persons who interacted tangibly with the relics of the Book of Mormon during the protection period from September 1827 to the early winter of 1828, taken collectively, confirm that the origin story of the Book of Mormon record is equally true.

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## NOTES

1. In *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories*, 1:232 (hereafter *JSP*, H1).
2. See Terryl L. Givens, “‘Devices of the Devil’: The Book of Mormon as Cultural Product or Sacred Fiction,” in *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 155–84. See also, for example, sociologist Rodney Stark’s comparison of Joseph Smith’s unique production of modern scripture to Shakespeare’s creation of literature and Mozart’s musical compositions: “Suppose that someone with the literary gifts of William Shakespeare underwent a series of mental events he or she interpreted as contact with the supernatural. Would it not be likely that the revelations produced in this way would be messages of depth, beauty, and originality? . . . The case of Joseph Smith is remarkably similar.” Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Reid L. Nielson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 40, 42.
3. As William E. McLellin, who served as a scribe for one of Joseph’s revelations, described it: “The scribe seats himself at a desk or table, with pen, ink and paper.

- The subject of enquiry being understood, the Prophet and Revelator enquires of God. He spiritually sees, hears and feels, and then speaks as he is moved upon by the Holy Ghost, the 'thus saith the Lord,' sentence after sentence." In *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents*, 1:xxxiii (hereafter *JSP*, D1).
4. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 178.
  5. See Andrew H. Hedges, "'All My Endeavors to Preserve Them': Protecting the Plates in Palmyra, 22 September–December 1827," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 14–23. This work has been foundational to the present study.
  6. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015). This work has been vital to the present study. I am particularly indebted to Michael MacKay for his generous help in providing me with source material from his research for many of the historical accounts related herein.
  7. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 100.
  8. Joseph Knight had apparently not given Joseph permission to take his wagon, for when Knight awoke the next morning and found his horse and wagon missing, he was alarmed that it had been stolen, concluding "that a rogue had stolen them," according to Lucy Smith in her *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 101. See also Joseph Knight's Recollection that in the morning "my Horse and Carriage was gone," in Dean C. Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 33.
  9. In *JSP*, H1:232.
  10. Lucy Smith wrote that "he had deposited [the plates] in a cavity in a birch log 3 miles distant and he too covered it with the bark of the same." Lucy Mack Smith, *History, 1844–1845*, book 5, p. [11]; book 6, p. [2], Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; and Joseph Smith, *History*, vol. A-1, in *JSP*, H1:8. On Martin Harris's statement that the plates were originally concealed in a hollowed-out tree, see Joel Tiffany, "Mormonism," *Tiffany's Monthly*, August 1859, 165.
  11. See Hedges, "'All My Endeavors to Preserve Them,'" 14–23. Hedges summarizes multiple efforts of persons such as Samuel Lawrence, Willard Chase, and Sally Chase to take the plates because "Lawrence and perhaps others had learned of the plates' existence through 'revelation' from illegitimate sources" (p. 19).
  12. Testimony of Willard Chase, Manchester, NY, 1833, as cited in Eber D. Howe, *History of Mormonism, or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion* (Painesville, OH: 1840), 243.
  13. Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 32.
  14. *Kansas City Daily Journal*, June 5, 1881; reprinted in the *Deseret Evening News*, June 11, 1881; emphasis added.
  15. "The Last Man," *Chicago Times*, October 17, 1881, as cited in George Reynolds, *The Myth of the "Manuscript Found"* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 82; emphasis added.
  16. Ole A. Jensen, "Testimony of Martin Harris," MS 5569, folder 1, Church History Library.
  17. Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet, and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1893), 10, 13.
  18. Joseph Smith, *History*, vol. A-1, 9.

19. Lucy Smith states that Joseph “went to bring the record which he had deposited in a cavity in a birch log 3 miles distant.” Lucy Smith, History, book 5, p. [11].
20. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 102.
21. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 104. Lucy mentioned here that Joseph kept the Urim and Thummim “constantly about his person.”
22. Herbert S. Salisbury, “Things the Prophet’s Sister Told Me,” July 2, 1945, Secure Stacks manuscript, MS 4122 2, folder 1, Church History Library.
23. Martha Campbell to Joseph Smith, December 19, 1843, Church History Library. Because both Lucy Smith and Josiah Stowell were present when Joseph handed the plates in at the window, perhaps they both helped or carried them simultaneously.
24. Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 166.
25. Martha Campbell to Joseph Smith, December 19, 1843.
26. MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 13.
27. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 107.
28. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 101.
29. Joseph Smith, History, vol. A-1, 9.
30. See Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 108; and Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection,” 33–34.
31. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:180.
32. Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection,” 34. There are conflicting accounts and confusion about who this great rodsman was. Joseph Knight Sr. identified him as “Beeman,” perhaps confusing Alvah Beaman, who had helped Joseph hide the plates under the fireplace, as the rodsman.
33. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 109.
34. Martin Harris, as quoted in Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 170.
35. See Joseph Smith, History, vol. A-1, 5; and Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 170.
36. See Hedges, “All My Endeavors to Preserve Them,” 18.
37. Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 167.
38. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 111.
39. Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 168.
40. It should be noted that Lucy Harris later denied having ever believed in the reality of the Book of Mormon record. She said the religion of Mormonism “was false” and called it a “delusion.” E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), 256.
41. Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 169–70.
42. Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 167.
43. Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 166.
44. See Mary Salisbury Hancock, “The Three Sisters of Joseph Smith,” *Saints’ Herald*, January 11, 1954, 12.
45. “The Prophet’s Sister Testifies She Lifted the B of M Plates,” *The Messenger* (Berkeley, CA), October 1954, 1, 6. See also Dan Vogel, comp., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:649.
46. Martha Campbell to Joseph Smith, December 19, 1843.
47. Nels Madsen and Parley P. Pratt, interview of Emma Smith Bidamon, 1877, Secure Stacks manuscript, MS 852, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
48. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald*, October 1, 1879, 290.
49. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 290.
50. For example, when asked in this same interview, “Did he [Joseph Smith] not have other wives than yourself?” Emma responded, “He had no other wife but me; nor

- did he to my knowledge ever have.” This response is inconsistent with the historical record. See Brian C. Hales, “Emma and Hyrum Accept Plural Marriage,” in *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 2:33–61.
51. Joseph Smith III to Mrs. E. Horton, March 7, 1900, Community of Christ Library–Archives, as cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:546–47.
  52. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 290.
  53. Isaac described Joseph at this time as a “careless young man” and “insolent to his father” and that he “followed a business [treasure searching through seer stones] I could not approve.” Isaac Hale Statement, 1834, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:284–85.
  54. Isaac Hale Statement, 4:285.
  55. Isaac Hale Statement, 4:286. See also Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 257–58.
  56. Isaac Hale said of the experience that he was “dissatisfied, and informed him [Joseph] that if there was any thing in my house of that description [the plates], which I could not be allowed to see, he must take it away; if he did not, I was determined to see it. After that, the Plates were said to be hid in the woods.” Isaac Hale Statement, 4:286.
  57. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 40. Although it is possible that Joseph Smith could have fabricated a set of metal plates as a prop to support his story, Martin Harris stated that he knew Joseph lacked sufficient money or credit to do so: “I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead” to fabricate the plates himself. Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 169–70.
  58. Joseph Smith, “Church History,” in *JSP*, H1:495.
  59. Read this detailed, physical description of the plates as an example: “I was also told [by the angel Moroni] where there was deposited some plates on which were engraven an abridgement of the records of the ancient prophets that had existed on this continent. . . . These record were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite so 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. . . . Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift, and power of God.” Joseph Smith, “Church History,” in *JSP*, H1:495.