

The Brass Plates and Their Prophets

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Introduction

One of the major purposes of the Book of Mormon is to establish the truthfulness of the Bible. In vision Nephi saw the coming forth of the Bible. He was told by a heavenly messenger that the Bible "*contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel.*" He learned that when it came forth "*it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord.*" He then was told that "*many parts which are plain and most precious ; and also many covenants of the Lord*" were taken away from this book and because of this loss "*an exceedingly great many do stumble.*"

Today the Bible is under attack. Even some who claim the sacred right of Christian leadership are among the foremost of these critics. For example, a man holding to title of Bishop in his faith gives this assessment of the Old Testament historical narrative:

The historic saga of Israel that begins in slavery in Egypt and wanders through the wilderness to the conquest of Canaan, to the establishment of a united kingdom that endured division and civil war, defeat and exile, only to return to their holy land, is a narrative written by a variety of persons over a half of a millennium. It is filled with geographical misinformation and the biological, geological, and astrophysical information only of this ancient time. It reflects cultural traditions long since abandoned as unworthy of civilized people. . . . To suggest that this text is in any sense the "literal Word of God" is to place extreme limits on both its truth and its power.

As this cleric continues his exploration and analysis of this holy record, which he claims to be defending, he makes very clear his fundamental position regarding the core message of this sacred text:

I, for example, do not believe in a God who willed Jesus to suffer for my sins. I do not believe in a God whose inner need for justice is satisfied when his son is nailed to a cross. I regard the substitutionary version of the atonement as a barbaric attack on both the truth of God and the meaning of human life.⁽¹⁾

The Book of Mormon, particularly the quotations from the brass plates, are today the Bible's most powerful and effective defense. The Book of Mormon is not only a *Second Witness for Christ*, it is also a witness to the truth of the biblical record and its gospel message. Simply put, *if the Book of Mormon is true then the Bible is true.*

Robert Millet points out that Latter-day Saints have frequently gotten the Bible/Book of Mormon evidential relationship backwards. It has been common to attempt to use the Bible as a tool for demonstrating the validity of the Book of Mormon. Recent conservative Christian attacks on the Book of Mormon should make clear the error of this approach. Today, their principle charge is that the Book of Mormon could not be true because it teaches a *different gospel* than that which they claim is "clearly taught in the Bible." No, as Joseph Fielding McConkie has so eloquently stated, "*The Bible is not common ground, it is battle ground.*" The starting place must be the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon testifies both to the *truth* and to the *meaning* of the biblical message. Again, the *brass plates* are a powerful contributor to that testimony.

First, it will be helpful if we take a look at some of the details of the attack on the historicity of the Bible. The current theory is one of *evolution*. The claim is that virtually all the books of our current Old Testament are the product of multiple writers and editors. The scope of the acceptance of this view is

illustrated by the observation of Richard Friedman, a University of California professor and widely recognized Bible scholar. He writes: "*There is hardly a biblical scholar in the world actively working on the problem [of biblical authorship] who would claim that the Five Books of Moses were written by Moses—or by any one person.*"⁽²⁾ Both Mormons and conservative Christians will dismiss such claims as having no validity and see little reason to understand the "evidence" which contributes to this *distorted* view. However, I believe that an understanding of those questions and findings which have prompted these claims, together with a big picture glimpse of this *theory of biblical evolution*, will contribute to our appreciation of the Book of Mormon witness and even to our understanding of the *brass plates* and their origin.

The Theory of Biblical Evolution

The current scholarly view is that the Old Testament in its present form is a fairly recent compilation (probably as late as after the Jews returned from their Babylonian captivity) which has drawn from the work of four majors *strands* or *traditions* of Hebrew narration, each with its own agenda. These are identified as the Jehovist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomists, and the Priestly writers, usually referred to by the shorthand, *J, E, D, and P*. Briefly, these traditions each represent a different views of Hebrew history, each written to achieve a specific objective of the author or authors.

- 1 The **Jehovist**: Referred to God as **Jehovah**. Believed to be a single writer contemporary with Solomon. Was the first to document the Hebrew history. Claimed to be a history similar in form to Homer's *Iliad*: a narrative that, while mostly fiction, reflects a true historical experience. This was predominantly a history of *Judah*, declaring the divine authority of the King, the temple, and the priesthood.
- 1 The **Elohist**: Referred to God as **Elohim**. This was a rewrite of Hebrew history by a historian of the Northern Kingdom after their break with the *house of David*. This history emphasized the role of the individual rather than the priest. Its heros were Jacob and Joseph. "It was an attempt to explain the history of the present moment by shaping the folklore of a past that could have been at least one thousand years earlier. It contained kernels of history, but little more."
- 1 The **Deuteronomists**: The author of Deuteronomy or the *second law*. This is believed to be the book claimed to be "found" in the temple by the priests of Josiah. It's believed to have been written by these priests, or perhaps by Jeremiah, to reinforce the teachings of the prophets of that day. But their influence and editing extended far beyond the Book of Deuteronomy. "By the time the deuteronomists had finished their work, they had colored the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. They had supplied their nation with a philosophy of history, and they had touched up the books of the prophets. They had taught the Jewish people to see the past through their eyes."
- 1 The **Priestly** writers: Written during the Babylonian captivity to give the captives a strong sense of unique identity. "They did it primarily by asserting the power of the religious tradition of the Jews over the total life of the people. In the process they also edited and rewrote massive parts of their sacred history."

These four strands are believed to have been merged into one continuous coherent biblical narrative by a post exile editor referred to as **R** (for **Redactor**). This is generally assumed to have been Ezra.⁽³⁾

Two Responses

The Conservative Christian response declares the Old Testament to be the inerrant word of God. Each book is said to have been written by the identified author who wrote as if "God breathed" the words onto the page. They contend that each book contains all that author wrote and only what that author wrote.

The Book of Mormon makes a similar, yet very different response. While also proclaiming the Old Testament to be God's word, the Book of Mormon claims neither completeness nor inerrancy for that record. The Book of Mormon testifies that both biblical history and doctrine are true; but, we are told that there have been many changes and much has been lost. The inclusion in the Book of Mormon of many quotations from the brass plates provides the substructure for this testimony. There are quotations from

sources that scholars claim to be late additions to the record. There are also many quotations from sources unknown to biblical scholarship. But first, what are these *brass plates*?

What Are These Brass Plates?

Scholars claim a separate scriptural record maintained by the Northern and Southern Kingdoms (*J* and *E?*). Were there multiple records? Logic, historical evidence, internal analysis of the biblical text, and the Book of Mormon all answer with a resounding **yes!** Dr. Sidney Sperry provides some educated speculation regarding the origin and contents of these scriptural records:

What happened to the keeping of sacred records when the Israelites became sharply divided on political grounds—so much so that the two nations were enemies? The prophets in both nations probably paid little attention to the political lines of division, but it is improbable that all of them had their words recorded in the scriptures of both nations. From the time of the division until the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C., the brass plates may well have been the official scripture of the ten tribes. It is probable that some prophets wrote on these plates whose writings may not have been recorded on the records kept in Judah [meaning in the Southern Kingdom]. Were Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and Ezias (1 Nephi 19:10; Helaman 8:20) among them? They were all Hebrew prophets known to the Nephites, but their names do not appear in our current Old Testament. It is also possible that the writings of some prophets in Judah were not placed on the brass plates during the period under consideration, but of this we have no way of knowing.⁽⁴⁾

The *brass plates* the "official scripture of the ten tribes"? Then how did Laban come to have these plates in Jerusalem in 600 BC? Dr. Sperry suggests a possibility:

The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians when its capital of Samaria capitulated to Sargon II in 722 B.C. The forebears of Laban may have fled to Jerusalem to prevent the sacred records from falling into alien hands. Lehi's grandfather or great-grandfather may have left his northern home for Jerusalem in order to prevent his children from intermarrying and making religious compromises with the foreigners brought into the land by the Assyrians.⁽⁵⁾

Scholars now believe that a significant number of Israelites fled the Northern Kingdom, seeking refuge in Judah. Their evidence is consistent with Dr. Sperry's speculation—they brought Scriptures with them and those Scriptures were different from the Scripture of Judah.

A further insight regarding the brass plates prophets is found in a comment of Mormon, in 3 Nephi 10:16. There had been great persecution of the believers prior to the crucifixion of Christ and his appearance to the Nephites. Mormon, acknowledging that this was a fulfilment of prophecy, declared, "*Yea, the prophet Zenos did testify of these things, and also Zenock spake concerning these things, because they testified particularly concerning us, who are the remnant of their seed.*"

Note Mormon's identification of the Nephites as *remnants of the seed* of the Brass Plate prophets, Zenos and Zenock. These were *tribe of Joseph* prophets. Sidney Sperry assumes that there *must* have been separate records and suggests the outlandish, yet almost obvious possibility, "*the brass plates may well have been the official scripture of the ten tribes.*" That is, the *brass plates* may have been the master copy, the original, of the Northern Kingdom scripture.

King Benjamin's identification of the language of this record as Egyptian (Mosiah 1:4) introduces a further line of speculation. Could this record have originated as the family record of Joseph the son of Jacob. His wife was Egyptian. His sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were Egyptian. That may have been the only language they knew. Of course, Joseph would have had a copy of the then extent scriptural record in Egyptian. Might not his family have continued to maintain that Egyptian (maybe *reformed Egyptian*) language record?

Our Old Testament is the record of the tribe of Judah—it's the "*Stick of Judah*." Are the brass plates not at least part of the "*Stick of Joseph*"? If this view of the Brass Plates as the *record of the tribe of Joseph* is correct, then the Book of Mormon is but the continuation of a *family history* which may have been begun by Joseph himself. The Book of Mormon would be the middle chapters of this history. Are not the *Doctrine and Covenants* and current church history the final chapters of this great family epoch?

The Contribution of the Brass Plates

First, a quick review of what we know about the content of the brass plates is in order. From various Book of Mormon references we can piece together at least a glimpse of what they contain. Elder McConkie gives this brief summary:

They contain the record of the Jews down to the days of Zedekiah, including the genealogies of the people and the prophecies of the holy prophets, among which are the words of Isaiah and portions of Jeremiah.

They contain, in their perfect form, the law of Moses and the five books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

They contain the writings of Joseph who was sold into Egypt, than which few have been greater, and on them is found the mysteries of God and the commandments he has given to the children of men.

They contain books of holy scripture of which the world does not dream, including the writings of Zenock, Neum, And Zenos.⁽⁶⁾

The Brass Plates Testimony

Lehi and Nephi also found on the Brass Plates an additional testimony to that revelation of Jesus Christ which they themselves had received. They found in the teachings of Zenos, Neum, and Zenock very detailed prophecies of Christ's mortal ministry, the cataclysms to accompany his crucifixion, the scourging and scattering of Israel, and Israel's latter-day gathering and restoration (1 Nephi 19:10-17). Further, from the unique message of these prophets who's writings we do not have in our biblical record, they obtained the knowledge that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been known by all the prophets throughout God's revelation to man. (Yes, *some plain and precious parts are missing from our biblical record*). Elder McConkie emphasizes the importance of this contribution:

What interests us more than the books included on the brass plates is the tone and tenor and general approach to the gospel and to salvation that they set forth. They are gospel oriented and speak of Christ and the various Christian concepts which the world falsely assumes to have originated with Jesus and the early apostles.⁽⁷⁾

Beyond Testimony

Alma, teaching the Zoramites who had been cast out of their synagogues, quotes from Zenos (Alma 33:4-11—this is a prayer about prayer):

Thou art merciful, O God, for thou hast heard my prayer, even when I was in the wilderness; yea, thou wast merciful when I prayed concerning those who were mine enemies, and thou didst turn them to me.

Yea, O God, and thou wast merciful unto me when I did cry unto thee in my field; when I did cry unto thee in my prayer, and thou didst hear me.

And Again, O God, when I did turn to my house thou didst hear me in my prayer.

And when I did turn unto my closet, O Lord, and prayed unto thee, thou didst hear me.

Yea, thou art merciful unto thy children when they cry unto thee, to be heard of thee and not of men, and thou wilt hear them.

Yea, O God, thou hast been merciful unto me, and heard my cries in the midst of thy congregations.

Yea, and thou hast also heard me when I have been cast out and have been despised by mine enemies; yea, thou didst hear my cries, and wast angry with mine enemies, and thou didst visit then in thine anger with speedy destruction.

*And thou didst hear me because of mine afflictions and my sincerity; and it is **because of thy Son** that thou hast been thus merciful unto me. therefore I will cry unto thee in all mine afflictions, for in thee is my joy; for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, **because of thy Son**.*

"**Because of thy Son!**" You don't find this message anywhere in the Old Testament. This is the **gospel of Jesus Christ** taught some six or seven hundred years before Christ's mortal birth. One speaker, commenting on this last verse, called it a beautiful description of the meaning of grace.

In 2 Nephi 2:17, Lehi begins his explanation of the purpose and meaning of the fall, "And I, Lehi, according to the things which I have read . . ." Almost certainly, Lehi is referring here to what he has read from the brass plates. Note, however, that his teachings in this chapter go far beyond what we have in our current Old Testament. At the same time, Robert Millet points out that there are echos of Lehi's teaching can be found in the Book of Moses (the JST of Genesis), particularly in chapters 4 and 5.

In 2 Nephi 3, Lehi tells his son, Joseph, about the prophecies of his ancient namesake. These prophecies tell of the future divine role of the seed of Joseph and they also speak of another great future prophet named *Joseph*. Again, the passages quoted by Lehi are not part of the world's Bible. Even the future role of this *birthright tribe* is only faintly hinted. But, they were once part of this record and have now been at least partially restore in the JST of Genesis chapter 50.

The world's version of the Old Testament says little about Melchizedek. Much of our unique Latter-day Saint understanding of this great priesthood leader comes to us from Alma's discourse to the people of Ammonihah (Alma 13:14-19). Where did Alma get this additional detail? Obviously, from the brass plates. And today, in the JST of Genesis chapter 14, we can probably read the same thing that Alma read.

Robert Millet makes this insightful observation:

I am convinced . . . that the closest approximation you and I have to the brass plates, one of the best ways we can get close to understanding what was on the brass plates, is Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible. If you want to know what was there beyond what is obviously in the Book of Mormon, look at the Joseph Smith Translation.⁽⁸⁾

Zenos: *The Prophet*

Next to the teachings of Isaiah no brass plates prophet is quoted with greater reverence, authority, and frequency than Zenos. Notice how Nephi refers to Zenos: 1 Nephi 19:11 and 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. For Nephi, Zenos is *the Prophet*. Elder McConkie suggests this significance: "I do not think I overstate the matter when I say that next to Isaiah himself—who is the prototype, pattern, and model for all the prophets—there was not a greater prophet in Israel than Zenos. And our knowledge of his inspired writings is limited to the quotations and paraphrasing summaries found in the Book of Mormon." Dr. Millet simply observes that, "Isaiah and Zenos are big in the eyes of the Nephites."

Zenos' Allegory

There is no teaching of Zenos given to us in the Book of Mormon that is more suggestive of his prophetic status than the Allegory of the Olive Tree quoted in Jacob, chapter 7. A recent book on this allegory, published by FARMS, gives this introduction and appraisal:

The allegory of the olive tree, written by Zenos and quoted by Jacob to his people in Jacob 5 in the Book of Mormon, strikes us . . . as one of the most magnificent allegories in all the sacred literature of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Besides its exceptional length and exquisite detail, Zenos's extended allegory communicates important meaning, deep emotion, rich wisdom, and divine feeling. No other allegorical text encompasses greater historical scope and typological vitality. It deserves an honored place alongside the best biblical parables or symbolic literature.⁽⁹⁾

Jacob 5, the longest chapter in the Book of Mormon, is also one of the most difficult. Dr. Millet describes it as "a panoramic vision of the destiny of the house of Israel." He gives its scope as "from premortal times to millennial times. It is the things God has in store for his chosen people." Jacob said, "I will unfold this mystery unto you" (Jacob 4:18). He then quotes the allegory of Zenos. Brother Millet implies that Jacob's *unfolding* has left most of us with just another great mystery. Yet, Jacob doesn't leave us there. Dr. Millet asks concerning this allegory, "If I wanted to know what this meant, where would I go?" He proposes that the best place to go is to Jacob's commentary in Chapter 6:4-12, particularly verses 4-6.

Dr. Millet's summary of this message is clear and powerful: "God will not let Israel Go. He will work with her, and he will cut that tree, and he will prune that tree, and he will dung that tree, and he will do whatever it takes."⁽¹⁰⁾

A Book of Mormon Problem

There are in the Book of Mormon some challenging verses. Look first at Moroni's description of *faith* and *hope* in Ether 12:6, "*I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen.*" There's a problem here isn't there. This has a very familiar *New Testament* ring. It's appears almost like Moroni was quoting Paul.

Now turn to 1 Nephi 22:15. This is part of Nephi's commentary on Isaiah chapters 48 and 49. Note his wording:

For behold, saith the prophet, the time cometh speedily that Satan shall have no more power over the hearts of the children of men; for the day soon cometh that all the proud and they who do wickedly shall be as stubble; and the day cometh that they must be burned.

Again, in 1 Nephi 22:23, the same wording is used:

For the time speedily shall come that all churches which are built up to get gain, and all those who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, and to do all manner of iniquity; yea, in fine, all those who belong to the kingdom of the devil are they who need fear, and tremble, and quake; they are those who must be brought low in the dust; they are those who must be consumed as stubble; and this is according to the words of the prophet.

Now Nephi says that he's quoting *the prophet*. Which prophet? Logically, this would be Isaiah, for this is a commentary on Isaiah. And we find these same words in Isaiah 47:14: "*Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them . . .*" But, Nephi continues (verse 24):

And the time cometh speedily that the righteous must be led up as calves of the stall, and the Holy One of Israel must reign in dominion, and might, and power, and great glory.

Now note what Malachi says in chapter 4 verses 1 and 2:

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.

Yes, there is some similarity between Nephi and Isaiah, but Nephi is much closer to Malachi. How can this similarity of language be explained. Obviously, Nephi is not quoting Malachi, just as Moroni is not quoting Paul. Yet, the similarity in their expression is too striking to be dismissed as coincidence. Elder McConkie provides us with some excellent council and insight:

Our understanding of the prophetic word will be greatly expanded if we know how one prophet quotes another, usually without acknowledging his source. Either Isaiah or Micah copied the prophetic words of the other relative to the mountain of the Lord's house . . .

Some unnamed Old Testament prophet, who obviously was Zenos, as the Book of Mormon testifies, spoke of the day when the wicked would be destroyed as stubble; when the righteous would be 'led up as calves of the stall'; when Christ should 'rise from the dead, with healing in his wings'; and when the Holy One of Israel would then reign on earth."

Both Paul and Mormon expound with great inspiration about faith, hope, and charity, in many verses using the same words and phrases. If there is any difference between them, it is that Mormon expounds the doctrines more perfectly and persuasively than does Paul.

It does not take much insight to know that Mormon and Paul both had before them the writings of some Old Testament prophet on the same subjects.

It is perfectly clear that John the Beloved is copying, in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, words written by John the Baptist, a practice with which we have no fault to find.

Once the Lord has revealed his doctrine in precise language to a chosen prophet, there is no reason why he should inspire another prophet to choose the same words and presenting then same doctrine on a subsequent occasion. It is much easier and simpler to quote that which is already been given in perfection. We are all commanded—including the prophets among us—to search the scriptures and thereby learn what other prophets have presented.⁽¹¹⁾

The Book of Mormon Favors *E*

Remember that old saying, *where there's smoke, there usually is fire*. As reported above, biblical scholars have put up and are continuing to put up a lot of smoke. Could there be some truth in their claims of multiple Hebrew traditions having been merged to form a single edited biblical text? In an interesting study, Dr. Sorenson points out that the brass plates quotations are mostly from that strand of Hebrew tradition which scholars identify with *E*. If the brass plates are a Northern Kingdom record, this is exactly what the findings of these scholars would predict.⁽¹²⁾

One interesting difference between the *J* and *E* traditions as described by these scholars is the *J* emphasis on Jerusalem and on the authority of the priestly class. The *J* writings teach that there could be no temple except at Jerusalem and no man could approach God except through a priest (a Levite). This latter particularly meant that only the priests could offer sacrifices. This addresses another one of those favorite areas of commentary by Book of Mormon critics. At his first base camp following his flight

from Jerusalem, Lehi (of the tribe of Manasseh) built an alter and offered sacrifices. Also, following their settlement in the promised land, the Nephites built a temple. Both of these are described as no-no's in our current Old Testament text. But, the proponents of the multiple tradition theory would say that this was only the teaching of the **J** priestly class in Jerusalem. Further, they would state that this position did not become a feature of the biblical text until after the exile—nearly 100 years after Lehi left Jerusalem.

The Book of Mormon's testimony is that the conclusions of myth and folklore as the origins of the Old Testament are totally false. The Old Testament contains a real history of God's dealing with real people. Yet, it would seem even probable that there is some truth in this claim of massive editing, restructuring, and omission. One biblical scholar has speculated that the original tradition upon which these later traditions are thought to have been based "was richer than any of its three major later derivative." He concludes, "It now seems likely that [our present] text has suffered more from losses than from glosses."⁽¹³⁾

Elephantine and the Temple

Remember the people of Elephantine discussed in the lesson on Lehi in the Desert? They escaped from Jerusalem at about the same time as Lehi and his family. They went about as far up the Nile as they could go. Their number included the prophet Jeremiah. Following the establishment of their new settlement, one of the first things they did was to build a temple. It would seem that even Jeremiah didn't know that a temple could only be built in Jerusalem.

References:

1. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, p. 54 & p. 69. Spong is the Episcopal bishop of Newark.
2. Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible*, (1987), p. 28.
3. This description of J, E, P, and D, including quotations, is taken from Spong, Op. Cit., pp. 43-54.
4. This presentation draws heavily from the work of Robert Millet, Dean of the BYU department of Religious Studies. Two source are used, a video, produced and distributed by FARMS, titled, "The Prophets of the Brass Plates" (a transcript is available); and a Book of Mormon Symposium paper titled, "The Influence of the Brass Plates," published in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, edited by Nyman and Tate.
5. Millet paper, p. 208.
6. McConkie, Bruce R., "The Doctrinal Restoration." published in *The Joseph Smith Translation: the Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, edited by Nyman and Millet, pp. 16-17 (quoted in Millet video).
7. Ibid., p. 17 (quoted in Millet video).
8. Ibid., p. 17 (quoted in Millet video).
9. Ricks and Welch, ed., *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, p. ix. This is a massive 570 page book, containing 21 separate scholarly articles on Zeno's allegory.
10. Millet video transcript, pp. 19-20.
11. Millet paper, Op. Cit., pp. 215-6.
12. Sorenson, John L., *Nephite Culture and Society*, pp. 31-4.
13. H. D. Hummel, as quoted in Sorenson, p. 27.