



WHAT DID THE GOLDEN PLATES LOOK LIKE?

BY KIRK B. HENRICHSEN



(Far left) This painting illustrates the Angel Moroni showing the golden plates to Joseph Smith (seated in the middle) and witnesses Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer.

The drawing (left) depicts Joseph Smith showing the plates to the Eight Witnesses, who included his two brothers Hyrum and Samuel, as well as his father, Joseph Sr.

When some people interested in the Book of Mormon ask to see the golden plates, they are disappointed to learn that Joseph returned them to Moroni. When told that several witnesses did see and handle them, they ask, “What did they look like?”

Joseph Smith was careful to obey the command from the Lord that he not show the plates to others. As he translated the Book of Mormon, Joseph learned that special witnesses would be called to bear testimony of the ancient record written on

metal plates. He was quite relieved when he was permitted to show the plates to several witnesses. Those witnesses were then commanded to testify of their experience to others and to write their testimonies concerning the Book of Mormon.

Three men, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris, were privileged to be shown the plates by the Angel Moroni. Then eight witnesses were shown the plates by Joseph Smith. Their testimonies are printed at the front of every copy of the Book of Mormon.



What Do We Know?

Although no single comprehensive description of the Book of Mormon plates has been preserved, the Prophet Joseph Smith and several people closely associated with him made various statements that include partial descriptions of the plates. When all of the available sources are considered, quite a detailed picture emerges of the physical characteristics of the ancient Nephite record.

What Were the Plates Made Of?

*“The appearance of gold.”*¹—Joseph Smith Jr., Eight Witnesses, Orson Pratt

*“Golden plates.”*²—David Whitmer

Neither Joseph nor any of the witnesses said that the ancient record was made from solid gold. Nor did they use the term “gold plates” or “plates of gold.” All Joseph said is that they had “the appearance of gold.”

The presumption that the plates were made of solid gold is curious but probably not correct. It was Joseph’s enemies that coined the phrase “Gold Bible.” It is more appropriate to refer to the ancient metal record as “the Golden Plates,” referring to their color, not the material they were made of.

How Much Did the Plates Weigh?

*“Weighing altogether, from forty to sixty lbs.”*³—Martin Harris

*“I moved them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my work.”*⁴—Emma Smith

People of that time period were accustomed to purchasing household supplies by weight. A farmer would have a good idea of what a 60-pound bag of grain would feel like. A woman working in her kitchen would be required to lift a heavy iron kettle filled with water that may weigh up to 60 pounds.

THE GOLDEN PLATES COULDN'T BE MADE OF PURE GOLD

Many critics have been quick to point out that if the record was made of solid gold it would have weighed much more than a person could lift. Besides being too heavy, thin plates of pure gold would not function well as a book. The metal would be so soft that it could easily tear from the rings, and engraving would be limited to one side.

The text of the Book of Mormon itself refers to Nephi’s seeking “ore” from which to make his plates. Metal ore usually has a mixture of various metals in it. Gold and silver are often mixed together in an alloy called electrum. Logically, the Book of Mormon plates could have been composed of these two metals. Some have suggested a combination of copper and gold.

The Lord promised that the plates would preserve their “brightness” (see Alma 37:5–7). Because gold does not corrode, objects made of gold can last thousands of years. When exposed to oxygen, silver tarnishes until it turns black. Copper turns a green color. Ancient American metallurgists familiar with this process were able to accelerate the oxidation of silver and copper and remove its residue, leaving an enhanced gold surface. Thus, a composite metal could be made to have the appearance of solid gold. (For details, see “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’ ” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 10, no.1 [2001], 21).

How Big Were They?

*“Six inches wide by eight inches long.”*⁵

—Joseph Smith Jr.

*“Seven inches wide by eight inches in length.”*⁶—Martin Harris

*“Of the thickness of plates of tin.”*⁷—Martin Harris

*“When piled one above the other, they were altogether about four inches thick.”*⁸—Martin Harris

*“About eight inches long, seven inches wide.”*⁹—David Whitmer

*“About as thick as parchment.”*¹⁰—David Whitmer

*“Each plate was not far from seven by eight inches in width and length.”*¹¹—Orson Pratt

*“Not quite as thick as common tin.”*¹²
—Orson Pratt

*“Something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed.”*¹³—Orson Pratt

*“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.”*¹⁴
—Emma Smith

In court, testimonies that vary slightly from each other are often seen as more truthful than when they match precisely. If all the statements are exactly the same, it can indicate that the witnesses have compared notes to fabricate a story that is too perfect.

The length of eight inches is given in all of these statements. Three give a width of seven inches. Memory of things like dimensions should be regarded as approximate and should not be assumed as exact. What is evident is that the page size was only slightly longer than it was wide.

How Were They “Sealed”?

*“What there was sealed appeared as solid to my view as wood. . . . About the half of the book was sealed.”*¹⁵—David Whitmer

“A large portion of the leaves were so securely bound together that it was impossible



*to separate them.”*¹⁶—David Whitmer

*“About two-thirds were sealed up, and Joseph was commanded not to break the seal; that part of the record was hid up. The plates which were sealed contained an account of those things shewn unto the brother of Jared.”*¹⁷—Orson Pratt

The plates were sealed by Moroni after he had separated from the rest of his people. He would have used materials that were readily available to him at that time. The descriptions say they were “securely bound” and “appeared solid.” The statements indicate a complete encapsulation of the plates to protect and preserve them for the future. None of the witnesses mentions metal bands around the plates. This seems to be an artistic creation of the mid-twentieth century that has no documentary basis.

What Shape Were the Three Rings?

*“They were fastened with rings thus [a sketch shows a ring in the shape of a capital D with six lines drawn through the straight side of the letter to represent the leaves of the record].”*¹⁸—David Whitmer

This painting (far left) depicts the Angel Moroni delivering the plates to Joseph Smith.

The box (left), or lap desk as it was called because of its sloping hinged lid, belonged to Hyrum Smith and was lent to his brother Joseph to use for a time to hold the plates. The box has been passed down through the Hyrum Smith family.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JED CLARK

This facsimile of the plates was made for a recent exhibit about Joseph Smith at the Museum of Church History and Art. Visitors to the exhibit were given a chance to lift and turn the leaves of a replica matching the description of the golden plates.

“Bound together like the leaves of a book by massive rings passing through the back edges.”¹⁹—David Whitmer

“Put together on the back by three silver rings, so that they would open like a book.”²⁰—Martin Harris

“Bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book, and fastened at one edge with three rings running through the whole.”²¹—Orson Pratt

“Through the

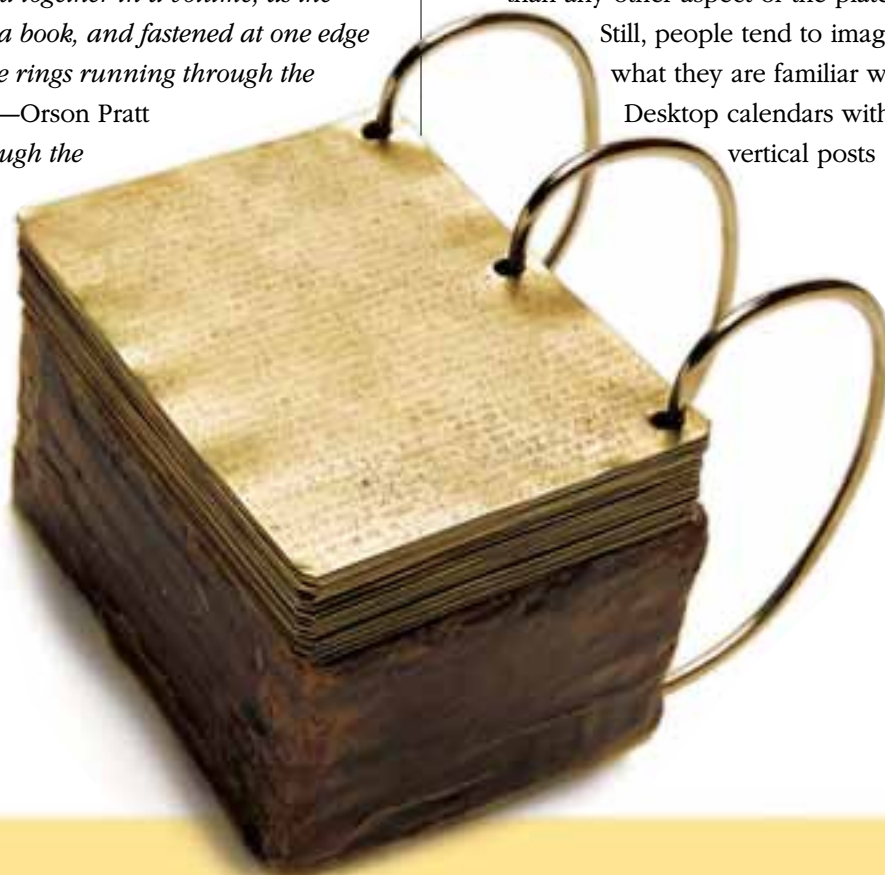
back of the plates were three rings which held them together, and through which a rod might easily be passed, serving as a greater convenience for carrying them.”²²

—Orson Pratt

We have more detail about the rings than any other aspect of the plates.

Still, people tend to imagine what they are familiar with.

Desktop calendars with vertical posts



A MODEL OF THE PLATES

Made by Steven Pratt

This facsimile of the plates was made for an exhibit at the Museum of Church History and Art. In an attempt to be as accurate as possible, all known statements about the plates were compiled and compared. Unfortunately, there was not space in this article to include all of the descriptions.

The process of making and using the model of the plates taught us more about them and led to some logical deductions. The difficulty in making the plates would encourage a scribe to be careful to fill the whole page and not waste any space. We learned how difficult it is to turn soft metal plates

over loose metal rings. You have to lift each one carefully or they bind against the rings. Pliable metal changes with the pressures of movement; it becomes brittle and breaks. The holes have to be an elongated shape larger than the rings and cannot be too close to the edges or they tear out.

Even though we have presented an image of what the plates may have looked like, many exact details are still lacking.

For more about the making of this replica of the plates, see “A Golden Opportunity,” *New Era*, Feb. 2006, 34.

sharply curved at the top were commonly used in the mid-twentieth century. It was only natural for people to transfer this image to the plates. But that is not what the witnesses describe. They use the term “massive rings.” Taken literally, “ring” describes a circular shape. David Whitmer approved of a sketch showing the rings shaped like a rounded capital “D” with the plates indicated on the straight side. We found that this design allows the plates to be turned along the ring smoothly and that the rings can be pivoted back to lay nearly flat against the stack of plates. It also fits Orson Pratt’s description of rings “through which a rod might easily be passed, serving as a greater convenience for carrying them.”

How Full Were the Pages?

*“[The plates] were filled with . . . characters . . . small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction and much skill in the art of engraving.”*²³—Joseph Smith Jr., Orson Pratt

*“There were fine engravings on both sides.”*²⁴—John Whitmer

*“We also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.”*²⁵—Eight Witnesses

*“Upon each side of the leaves of these plates there were fine engravings, which were stained with a black hard stain so as to make the letters more legible and easier to be read.”*²⁶—Orson Pratt

What Was the Reading Order?

“I wish to mention here that the title-page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated, the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writing in general.” [The asterisk directs the reader to a note that says, “*That is, from right to left.”]*²⁷—Joseph Smith Jr.

Does It Really Matter What the Book of Mormon Plates Looked Like?

After Joseph Smith completed the translation of the Book of Mormon, the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses were allowed to see and handle the plates.

Their signed statements are in the front of all copies of the Book of Mormon.

We have the full text of what Joseph Smith was instructed to translate. It is a message to us from the past, from a people who had the truth and then lost it. It is meant to instruct us.

Seeing the plates would not necessarily motivate someone to accept the restoration of the gospel and make changes in his or her life. That motivation comes from reading and accepting the teachings of the Book of Mormon. What really matters is the spiritual witness that is promised to those who humbly seek to know the truth of these things. A true testimony of the Book of Mormon comes from reading it and, as counseled by Moroni in a promise he left to us in Moroni 10:3–5, praying about it. **NE**

NOTES

A longer version of this article was originally published by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship as “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2001), 16–21.

1. “Church History,” *Times and Seasons*, Mar. 1, 1842, 707 (also known as the Wentworth Letter); “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses,” Book of Mormon; and *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* [pamphlet, 1840], 12–13. Orson Pratt was not an eyewitness of the plates but gathered eyewitness accounts.
2. *Kansas City Journal*, June 5, 1881, in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (1991), 60.
3. *Iowa State Register*, Aug. 1870, in Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (1983), 226.
4. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *The Saints’ Herald*, Oct. 1, 1879, 290.
5. Wentworth Letter, 707.
6. Quoted in “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’” 18.
7. Quoted in “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’” 18.
8. Quoted in “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’” 18.
9. *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 24, 1888, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, 221.
10. *Kansas City Journal*, June 5, 1881, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, 64.
11. *An Interesting Account*, 13.
12. *An Interesting Account*, 13.
13. *An Interesting Account*, 13.
14. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 290.
15. *Deseret Evening News*, Aug. 16, 1878, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, 20–21.
16. *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 24, 1888, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, 221.
17. *Deseret News*, July 23, 1856, 154.
18. Edward Stevenson diary, Dec. 22–23, 1877, archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
19. *Kansas City Journal*, June 5, 1881, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, 64.
20. Quoted in “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’” 19.
21. *An Interesting Account*, 13.
22. *Deseret News*, Jan. 12, 1859, 190.
23. Wentworth Letter, 707; Pratt, *An Interesting Account*, 13.
24. John Whitmer to Theodore Turley, “in the presence of his anti-Mormon friends,” in Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (1981), 131.
25. “Testimony of the Eight Witnesses,” Book of Mormon.
26. *Deseret News*, Jan. 12, 1859, 190.
27. *History of the Church*, 1:71.

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