

# SACRED WRITING ON METAL PLATES IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

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The alleged absurdity of the Book of Mormon having been written on golden plates and its claim of the existence of an early sixth century BC version of the Hebrew Bible written on bronze (brass) plates<sup>1</sup> has long been a favorite target of critics of the book.<sup>2</sup> Today, however, the critics tend to admit that there are numerous examples of ancient writing on metal plates. Indeed, they have for the most part dropped the argument that the idea of ancient writing on metal plates is absurd; some ironically now claim instead that knowledge of ancient writing on metal plates was readily available in Joseph Smith's day. Joseph is now pictured as simply having absorbed from his environment an idea originally dismissed as absurd.<sup>3</sup> In this regard Hugh Nibley's

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1. See below for my rationale for equating the Book of Mormon term *brass* with the current usage of the term *bronze*. I would like to thank Matthew Roper for helpful suggestions.

2. Some chronologically ordered examples include John Hyde Jr., *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* (New York: Fetridge, 1857), 217–20; M. T. Lamb, *The Golden Bible* (New York: Ward and Drummond, 1887), 11; Stuart Martin, *The Mystery of Mormonism* (London: Odhams, 1920), 27; and Anthony A. Hoekema, *Mormonism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 89–90. Examples could be further multiplied. I would like to thank Matthew Roper for these references.

3. For an example, see Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue* 26/3 (1993): 156–57. As I have noted elsewhere, Metcalfe distorts his sources in his attempts to find a nineteenth-century reference to ancient writing on gold plates. See William J. Hamblin, "An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe's Assumptions and Methodologies," *Review of Books on the*

observation that “it will not be long before men forget that in Joseph Smith’s day the prophet was mocked and derided for his description of the plates more than anything else” seems quite prescient.<sup>4</sup>

What were the “brass plates” of the Book of Mormon? Following standard early modern English usage,<sup>5</sup> the term *brass* in the Book of Mormon most likely has reference to various forms of the copper and tin alloy that we currently call bronze, rather than the alloy of copper and zinc now known as brass.<sup>6</sup> In this usage the Book of Mormon consistently follows the King James Version of the Bible, which also never uses the word *bronze*. The biblical Hebrew word *nechushah* was used indiscriminately to describe metals we would now distinguish as native copper as well as alloys that contain mostly copper, such as bronze or modern brass. It is usually translated in the KJV as *brass* but is rendered four times as *steel*.<sup>7</sup> The adoption of the word *bronze* (from Italian *bronzo*) for the copper/tin alloy to distinguish it from the brass copper/zinc alloy only became current in English in the late eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Even thereafter, “in reference to ancient times, and esp[ecially] to the nations of antiquity, ‘brass’ still meant the older [copper-and-tin] alloy.”<sup>9</sup> I will therefore use the modern terminology *bronze plates* in preference to the archaic *brass plates*, except in direct quotations from the Book of Mormon.

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*Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 462–70. Metcalfe ignores the most obvious nineteenth-century source for the idea of writing on golden plates, the KJV translation of Exodus 28:36 (discussed below), which states that “thou shalt make a plate of pure gold, and grave upon it . . . Holiness to the Lord.”

4. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 107.

5. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “brass.”

6. The word *bronze* never appears in the Book of Mormon; the word *brazen* (from “brazen serpent” of Helaman 8:14) is the adjectival form of *brass*; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “brazen.” Cf. Numbers 21:6–9 KJV, where the antecedent serpent mentioned in Helaman 8:14 is clearly said to be of “brass.”

7. See George A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), s.v. “bronze.”

8. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “bronze,” where Johnson’s 1755 dictionary is cited as defining bronze as brass.

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “brass.” Note, however, that Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Converse, 1828), distinguishes brass as “an alloy of copper and zinc” from bronze, “a compound of copper and tin.”

Previous studies have succeeded in demonstrating the widespread practice of writing on metal plates in antiquity.<sup>10</sup> I will attempt in this paper to provide a fuller historical context by focusing specifically on the evidence for the use of bronze and other metal plates for the preservation of sacred writing in four interrelated pre-Christian cultures of the central and eastern Mediterranean—Hebrew, Phoenician, Greek, and Italic.

### 1. Hebrew Writing on Metal Plates

In terms of their basic material culture, the Hebrews and their Canaanite, Phoenician, and Aramaic neighbors are quite often archaeologically indistinguishable.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is probably methodologically unnecessary to attempt to distinguish Hebrew examples of writing on metal from those of their close neighbors. However, since the Lehighites came from a specifically Hebrew cultural context, it is useful to treat Hebrew evidence as independent.

Specific Hebrew examples of writing on metal plates are relatively limited in number but clearly attest to the practice. There are five major examples:

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10. For collections of examples by LDS authors, see C. Wilfred Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 75–101; H. Curtis Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes,” in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 273–334; H. Curtis Wright, “Metallic Documents of Antiquity,” *BYU Studies* 10/4 (1970): 457–77. See also Paul R. Cheesman, *Ancient Writing on Metal Plates: Archaeological Findings Support Mormon Claims* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1985), which should be used with caution; see note 25 below. See also John Tvedtnes, “Etruscan Gold Book from 600 B.C. Discovered,” *Insights* 23/5 (2003): 1, 6. For recent studies on metal plates, see H. Curtis Wright, *Modern Presentism in Ancient Metal Epigraphy* (Salt Lake City: Wings of Fire, 2006); John W. Welch and Kelsey D. Lambert, “Two Ancient Roman Plates,” *BYU Studies* 45/2 (2006): 54–76; and John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper, “One Small Step,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 160–69.

11. For an account of why this is so, see William G. Dever, “How to Tell a Canaanite from an Israelite,” in *The Rise of Ancient Israel*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), 27–60.

1.1. The oldest example of Hebrew writing on metal is the engraved gold plate attached to the front of the turban of the high priest (at least 10C).<sup>12</sup> According to Exodus 28:36, Moses was ordered to “make a plate (*tzitz*) of pure gold, and engrave upon it as an engraved seal (*khote*), ‘Holy to Yahweh.’”<sup>13</sup>

1.2. Excavations in the late 1970s uncovered First Temple period tombs at Ketef Hinnom, near Jerusalem. Among the artifacts discovered in this dig were two small silver plates dating to the seventh century BC, containing the priestly benedictions found in Numbers 6:24–26<sup>14</sup> and representing the “earliest fragments of the biblical text known up to the present.”<sup>15</sup>

1.3. In 161 BC, Judas Maccabaeus concluded a treaty with the Romans, which “the Romans engraved on bronze tablets and sent to Jerusalem for the Jews to keep there as a record.”<sup>16</sup> Josephus’s account

12. Throughout this paper I will use parentheses to indicate the date of a document under discussion. Most of these dates are archaeological approximations. All dates are BC unless otherwise indicated. C indicates “century”: thus (10C) means tenth century BC, (6C) means sixth century BC, etc.

13. The engraved stone Tablets of the Law (*luchot ha-eben wa-ha-torah*, Exodus 24:12) that were kept in the ark of the covenant are an example of formal legal codes engraved on stone, paralleling the archaic example of Hammurabi’s law code; see David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:304, for a list of biblical passages referring to the Tablets. Hammurabi’s law code was also inscribed on a stone stele or tablet; see James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:138–67, fig. 59. As will be described below, from the sixth and fifth centuries on, “modern” versions of such engraved law codes increasingly came to be written on bronze plates instead of on stone tablets.

14. See Gabriel Barkay, *Ketef Hinnom: A Treasure Facing Jerusalem’s Walls* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1986), 29–30. See also Gabriel Barkay, “The Divine Name Found in Jerusalem,” *News from the Field, Biblical Archaeology Review* 9/2 (March/April 1983): 14–19; William J. Adams Jr., “Lehi’s Jerusalem and Writing on Metal Plates,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 204–6; Adams, “More on Silver Plates from Lehi’s Jerusalem,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 27–28; and Aaron P. Schade, “The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 319–23.

15. Barkay, *Ketef Hinnom*, 30. The silver plates were rolled into small scrolls designed to be worn around the neck as amulets (p. 29).

16. 1 Maccabees 8:22, in Jonathan A. Goldstein, *1 Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 345. The Greek phrase for bronze plates in 1 Maccabees, *deltoi chalkoi*, will be discussed below, note 42.

states, however, that the Jews themselves engraved the document in bronze.<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Goldstein, in his analysis of this incident, concludes that since there are no other known instances of Romans *sending* bronze treaties to their allies (as opposed to keeping copies of these treaties on bronze plates in Rome), Josephus's account is probably more accurate.<sup>18</sup> Later, in 140 BC, when Simon was proclaimed by the Jews as both high priest and prince, "they ordered that this text [of Simon's privileges and responsibilities] be drawn up on bronze tablets and set up in the precinct of the sanctuary [of the temple] in a conspicuous place and that copies of the tablets be placed in the treasury [of the temple] so as to be available for Simon and his sons."<sup>19</sup> These examples indicate that, following the common practice of most other cultures of the eastern Mediterranean (discussed below), the Jews kept records of important historical documents on bronze plates in their temple.

1.4. The most well-known example of Hebrew writing on metal plates is the famous Copper Scroll (3Q15) from Qumran (1C AD), containing a list of hidden temple treasures.<sup>20</sup> Although the origin and purpose of the Copper Scroll is widely debated, it is a clear example of an attempt to preserve an important sacred record by writing on copper/bronze (Heb. *nechushah*) plates and then hiding the document.<sup>21</sup>

1.5. The Hebrew ritual magic and ascension text *Sefer ha-Razim* (late 3C AD) contains numerous references to writing on metal plates or amulets (Heb. *tzitz*).<sup>22</sup>

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17. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.10.6 (#417).

18. Goldstein, *1 Maccabees*, 366. The practice of exchanging treaties written on metal plates in the Near East dates at least to the thirteenth century BC, when the Hittite-Egyptian treaty was engraved on silver plates; see James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 199–203. For general discussion and bibliography on this incident, see Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 190.

19. 1 Maccabees 14:48–49, in Goldstein, *1 Maccabees*, 488; cf. 1 Maccabees 14:18, in Goldstein, *1 Maccabees*, 485.

20. For a summary and references to the most important bibliography, see *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:1133–34.

21. Hugh Nibley noted this fact years ago in *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 55–57, 221, 245–46.

22. Text in Mordecai Margalioth, *Sepher ha-Razim* (Jerusalem: Yediot Achronot, 1966); translation in Michael A. Morgan, *Sepher ha-Razim: The Book of the Mysteries* (Chico, CA:

In conclusion, the evidence leaves no doubt that the Hebrews had a long-standing tradition dating at least to the First Temple period (i.e., well before 587 BC) of writing sacred texts on metal plates for amulets, inscriptions, and literary documents.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Semitic Writing on Metal Plates<sup>24</sup>

2.1. There are numerous examples of Presargonic Sumerian writing on metal, including knife blades, lance heads, pegs, vases, bowls, figurines, and plates, dating from roughly 2700 to 2350 BC.<sup>25</sup> Most notable

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Scholars Press, 1983). The following are the major references:

gold (1.136 = trans. 34; 2.125 = trans. 54; 5.20 = trans. 74; 6.30 = trans. 79)

silver (2.56 = trans. 48; 2.100 = trans. 52; 2.127 = trans. 54; 2.126 = trans. 54; 2.139 = trans. 55; 3.38 = trans. 64)

copper/bronze (1.203, 207 = trans. 40; 2.32 = trans. 45; 2.117 = trans. 53; 2.139 = trans. 55; 2.153 = trans. 56)

iron (2.114 = trans. 53)

lead (2.63 = trans. 49)

tin (1.145 = trans. 35)

For some additional references to writing on metal in Rabbinic literature, see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1982), 1279b.

23. The mention of an “iron pen” in Jeremiah 17:1 may have reference to a tool for engraving metal or stone.

24. I have not included examples of writing on metal bowls or statue inscriptions, which would more than double the known examples of northwest Semitic writing on metal. For examples, see John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 2, *Aramaic Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 57–59, 122–23; vol. 3, *Phoenician Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 141–42. One interesting example is the Bernardini bowl (7C), which was apparently made by Phoenicians. Made in an Egyptianized style, it includes a lengthy pseudo-Egyptian inscription and a short Phoenician inscription. It was found in a tomb in Italy, demonstrating the remarkable mix of cultures, writing on metal, and script found in the eastern Mediterranean during Lehi’s lifetime. See also Sabatino Moscati, ed., *The Phoenicians* (New York: Abbeville, 1988), 446 (plate); Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 3:71. Ten of the Phoenician metal bowls cataloged by Glenn Markoe have inscriptions; see *Phoenician Bronze and Silver Bowls from Cyprus and the Mediterranean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 72. He briefly mentions ten other metal bowls with inscriptions in Phoenician, Aramaic, or Hebrew (p. 74). Markoe also discusses the Bernardini bowl (his E1) on pages 188–91, 274–77 (fig. E1).

25. Jerrold S. Cooper, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions*, vol. 1, *Presargonic Inscriptions* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1986), gives a complete list of all known inscriptions from Presargonic times. Inscriptions on various forms of metal are found on pages 16, 20, 25, 47, 49, 58, 60, 62, 93, 97, and 99. Cheesman notes that there is a

among these are three foundation plates: the copper plate of E'iginimpa'e of Adab,<sup>26</sup> the silver plate of Urluma of Umma (late 25C)<sup>27</sup> and the gold plate of Gishakidu of Umma (early 24C).<sup>28</sup> This evidence clearly indicates that writing on metal plates was well known in Mesopotamia in the time of the Jaredites, who originated there.<sup>29</sup>

2.2. The earliest known surviving example of writing on “copper plates” from the Syria/Palestine region are the Byblos syllabic inscriptions (18C), from the city of Byblos on the Phoenician coast.<sup>30</sup> The script is described as a “syllabary [that] is clearly inspired by the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, and in fact it is the most important link between the hieroglyphs and the Canaanite alphabet.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, it would not be unreasonable to describe the Byblos syllabic texts as eighteenth-century BC Semitic bronze plates written in reformed Egyptian characters.<sup>32</sup>

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foundation plate in the temple of Dagan dating to 3000 BC, which is now in the Louvre. See Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents,” 285. Cheesman’s unsubstantiated claim of the existence of a copper plate from the Indus Valley civilization dating to 2800 BC cannot be confirmed (Cheesman, *Ancient Writing*, 48), and the plate is not included in standard works on the Indus Valley script.

26. Cooper, *Presargonic Inscriptions*, Ad 3.2 = p. 16, date unknown, from the twenty-fifth century or earlier.

27. Cooper, *Presargonic Inscriptions*, Um 4.2 = p. 93.

28. Cooper, *Presargonic Inscriptions*, Um 6 = p. 93.

29. Although Ether wrote his record on golden plates at the end of Jaredite history (Mosiah 8:9), it is not at all clear that this was a standard Jaredite cultural practice deriving from the Old World. There are no other references to Jaredite metal plates other than the book of Ether.

30. For a basic summary, see *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:178–80; the quotation is from 4:178a. For a detailed linguistic study and translation, see George E. Mendenhall, *The Syllabic Inscriptions from Byblos* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1985). The original publication is Maurice Dunand, *Byblia Grammata: Documents et recherches sur le développement de l'écriture en Phénicie* (Beirut: Direction des Antiquités, 1945); photographs and transcriptions of all the documents can be found on pages 71–88. It is worth noting that Byblos is only about 170 miles north of Jerusalem and that Lehi’s ancestors were from the northern tribe of Manasseh (1 Nephi 5:14; Alma 10:3).

31. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:178b.

32. There are faint traces of Byblos syllabic writing on the Azarbaal plate (2.4 below). The original inscription is too faint to read properly. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 3:9–12, with additional bibliography. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 105, noted the existence of these plates.

2.3. A large number of arrowheads bearing Phoenician inscriptions (12C–10C) have been discovered; they are frequently thought to have been used for divination rather than strictly military purposes.<sup>33</sup>

2.4. The Azarbaal plate is a triangular bronze plate from Byblos (mid-11C–10C) containing a short inscription. The precise interpretation and date of this plate is controversial, but several scholars see it as having either a magical, ritual, or divinatory purpose.<sup>34</sup>

2.5. Shalmaneser III (859–825 BC) inscribed a golden plate (now in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago) describing his conquests and sacrifices.<sup>35</sup>

2.6. The Kilamuwa gold plates (830–825 BC) contain a short prayer that was apparently attached to the handle of a staff of a courtier or priest.<sup>36</sup> It is, incidentally, interesting to note that many scholars see this as an Aramaic inscription written in Phoenician script, and it is thus another example (possibly analogous to the reformed Egyptian of the Book of Mormon) of the interchange of script and language in the ancient Near East.

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33. For general background, bibliography, and examples, see Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 3:1–8. The arrowheads are also discussed by Benjamin Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium BC* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 72–85. If they were not used for divination, they do not represent sacred writing on metal plates. However, if these arrowheads were indeed used for belomancy (arrow divination), they provide some of the earliest evidence of this practice. Note Nibley’s speculation on the relationship between belomancy and the pointers of the Liahona in *Since Cumorah*, 255–59.

34. Julian Obermann, “An Early Phoenician Political Document: With a Parallel to Judges 11:24,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58/3 (1939): 229–42; Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 3:9–12. Because of its triangular shape, this document is often prosaically called a “spatula.”

35. For a translation, see Daniel D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), 1:251 (#706–7). Shalmaneser also ordered the construction of the bronze gate of Balawat, which is inscribed with both illustrations and lengthy texts, but which is technically historical rather than religious. See L. W. King, *Bronze Reliefs from the Gates of Shalmaneser* (London: British Museum, 1915). Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, provides a translation in 1:224–32 (#612–25).

36. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 3:39–41; the approximate date is provided on p. 31.

2.7. The Carthage gold pendant (8C) is a votive inscription discovered in a later Carthaginian tomb.<sup>37</sup>

2.8. Among the many writings of Sargon II (714–705 BC) are six metal plates (in bronze, lead, silver, and gold) from Khorsabad, containing a lengthy inscription on Sargon's temple-building activities.<sup>38</sup>

2.9. An important example of early Phoenician writing on gold plates is the Pyrgi gold plate from Italy (500–475 BC).<sup>39</sup> This plate is a dedication by the Etruscan king Thefarie Velianas to the Phoenician goddess Astarte (syncretized to the Etruscan Uni = Latin Juno). One plate is in Phoenician; the other two are in Etruscan (see 4.2 below). This plate is thus a prime example of the spread of the Phoenician practice of writing sacred texts on golden plates from their original center in Phoenicia, via Carthage, to Italy, and is roughly contemporary with the Book of Mormon's claim that sacred texts were written on metal plates by the Phoenicians' closer neighbors, the Jews.

2.10. The Lapethos inscription from Cyprus (c. 275 BC) is not itself a bronze plate but contains an important reference to *h-dlt h-nchst*, or "the bronze plate," indicating that writing on bronze plates was known in Cyprus in the third century BC.<sup>40</sup>

These examples of early Semitic sacred writing on metal plates are sufficient to demonstrate that northwest Semitic languages were repeatedly and consistently written on metal plates from the twenty-fifth century BC until after the Greek conquests. The major types of

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37. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 3:68–71.

38. For translation, see Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2:56–59 (#106–15). See Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents," 293–94, for further sources. Wright's article also contains extensive bibliography on the famous silver and gold Persepolis plates of Darius.

39. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 3:151–59; Massimo Pallottino, *A History of Earliest Italy*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), plate 15; for illustrations, see Moscati, *Phoenicians*, 56.

40. Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966–69), 1:10 (#43.12), commentary in 2:60. The word *dalet* for "writing tablet" is also used in the Lachish letter 4, line 3. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, 1:35 (#194.3); cf. Graham I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1:2 (#1.004.3); Harry Torczyner, *Lachish I: The Lachish Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 79–81.

metal used were copper/bronze and gold, precisely as described in the Book of Mormon. Thus, although surviving examples of specifically Hebrew writing on gold and bronze plates—as opposed to Phoenician or other Semitic languages—are relatively rare, the abundance of examples from the general cultural region shows that this type of writing was quite common.

### 3. Greek Writing on Metal Plates

According to Walter Burkert, the practice of writing on metal plates was brought to the Greeks by Phoenicians in the seventh or sixth century BC,<sup>41</sup> at which time they also adopted the northwest Semitic term for “writing tablet,” *dlt*, as Greek *deltos*. The social context of writing on metal plates is preserved not only by the archaeological remains, but also by the classical Greek lexicographer Pollux (late 2C AD), who defined *deltos chalkos* (bronze plate) as referring to “ancient sacred law.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, the Greeks adopted the technology and practice of engraving sacred writings on metal plates from the Phoenicians at precisely the same time the Book of Mormon attests to the same practice among the Phoenicians’ closest neighbors, the Jews.

Classical Greek and Latin documents on gold and bronze are well known.<sup>43</sup> In this survey, I will provide only some basic examples that demonstrate the range of Greek sacred and historical writing on metal.

3.1. The Sybaris treaty from the temple at Olympia (6C BC)<sup>44</sup> is one of the oldest examples of Greek writing on bronze plates. This plate is a treaty between the Etruscan city of Sybaris and the “ser-

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41. Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 30.

42. Julius Pollux, *Onomasticon* 8.128, in *Pollucis Onomasticon*, ed. Eric Bethe (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1967), 2:141.

43. Wright, “Metallic Documents in Antiquity,” surveys much of the evidence. See also the *Apocalypse of Enoch* in the *Cologne Mani Codex* (fifth century AD), in Ron Cameron and Arthur Dewey, *The Colon Mani Codes* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979), 40–43.

44. Pallottino, *History of Earliest Italy*, plate 14.

daioi” (Sardinians?). It indicates that the custom of writing important historical documents on bronze plates to be preserved in temples as historical records dates back to at least the sixth century BC—precisely the time of Lehi.<sup>45</sup>

3.2. The temple of Dodona is noted for its large archaeological collection of surviving prophetic bronze plates from the early centuries BC. These include both votive inscriptions and prophetic materials from the oracle. They thus represent an example of the preservation of prophetic records on bronze plates.<sup>46</sup>

3.3. According to a legend recorded by Pausanias, around the year 370 BC Epiteles the son of Aeschines had a dream in which he was told where to dig to rescue the Great Goddess, who was “shut in her brazen chamber.” Epiteles dug at the designated spot, discovering a bronze vessel in which was “some tin foil, very thin, rolled like a book. On it were inscribed the mysteries of the Great Goddesses.”<sup>47</sup>

3.4. Plutarch describes a protoarchaeological expedition that excavated in what they called the “tomb of Alcmena.” But whatever tomb was actually excavated, they discovered “a bronze tablet with a long inscription; . . . the characters had a peculiar and foreign conformation, greatly resembling that of Egyptian writing.”<sup>48</sup>

3.5. The well-known Orphic gold plates (6C–5C BC) contain a collection of sacred texts related to the afterlife. Some interesting parallels to the Book of Mormon have been discussed by C. Wilfred Griggs.<sup>49</sup>

45. The Sybaris plate is thus an earlier example of a bronze treaty plate like that found among the Jews in the second century BC (see 1.3 above).

46. For the publication of the major inscriptions, see Constantin Carapanos, *Dodone et ses ruines* (Paris: Hachette, 1878). See also the bibliography cited in N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), s.v. “Dodona.”

47. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 4.26.6–8, in *Pausanias*, trans. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 2:317. This story of a divine vision revealing the location of a buried ancient sacred text on metal plates may sound familiar to many Latter-day Saints.

48. Plutarch, *Moralia*, “De Genio Socratis,” 577E–F, in *Plutarch*, trans. Phillip H. De Lacy and Benedict Einarson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 7:389, 391.

49. See Griggs, “Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” 96–101, for the major bibliography. For text and translation of the Orphic plates, see Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena*

3.6. Pausanias claims to have seen a copy of Hesiod's *Works and Days* written on lead plates and preserved at Helicon.<sup>50</sup>

3.7. A "golden book" (*chrousoun biblion*) containing the poetry of Aristomache of Erythrae was deposited in the Treasury of the Sicyonians at Delphi.<sup>51</sup> This Aristomache is not easily identifiable but is often thought to be a prophetic Sibyl.<sup>52</sup> If so, this is an example of keeping a book of prophetic oracles on golden plates in a temple.

#### 4. Italic Writing on Metal Plates

Nearly all surviving documents from Italy before the third century BC, when Rome began its conquest of the peninsula, are in Etruscan. The vast majority of these inscriptions are simply names on tombstones.<sup>53</sup> The Bonfantes list only eight Etruscan documents of any length, half of which are written on metal.<sup>54</sup> These four metal plates are also the oldest of the eight major surviving Etruscan documents; all of them are sacred texts.

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*to the Study of Greek Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 659–73. The date given is for the origin of the texts; some of the actual plates themselves were produced much later. There are thus two separate questions: what is the date of the ideas and texts, and what is the date of the practice of writing on gold plates?

50. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 9.31.4, in Pausanias, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 4:309.

51. Plutarch, *Moralia*, "Quaestiones Convivales," 5.2, 675B, in Plutarch, trans. Paul A. Clement and Herbert B. Hoffleit, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 8:387, 389. The term *biblion* is also translated as "tablet," but its more general meaning is a written document; it is the most common term in Greek for "book." If "tablet" is intended, it is usually rendered *biblion deltos*. See Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), s.v. "βιβλίον." Plutarch (c. AD 50–120) is citing a lost geographical work of Polemon of Illium (fl. 190 BC); see *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. "Polemon (3)." Thus, the golden *biblion* (book, or "bible," which derives from *biblion*) of Delphi dates to at least the third century BC and probably much earlier.

52. See Plutarch, *Moralia*, "Quaestiones Convivales," 8:389 note a. On the Sibyls as prophetesses throughout the ancient world, see H. W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

53. Giuliano Bonfante and Larissa Bonfante, *The Etruscan Language: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 48, mention 13,000 inscriptions in Etruscan, with only a few hundred in all other Italic languages including Latin.

54. Bonfante and Bonfante, *Etruscan Language*, 49–50.

4.1. The lead plate of Santa Marinella (500 BC), written on both sides, was a religious text.<sup>55</sup>

4.2. The Pyrgi plates (early 5C BC) have been discussed above (2.9). They represent not only one of the earliest lengthy Etruscan documents, but also sacred writing on gold plates in both Phoenician and Etruscan. Although not quite a “Rosetta Stone,” these plates were important in the deciphering of Etruscan.

4.3. The lead tablet of Magliano (475–450 BC) (inscribed on both sides) is a religious text discussing rituals and sacrifices.<sup>56</sup> Since both the Santa Marinella (4.1) and the Magliano lead plates were inscribed on both sides, it clearly indicates that they were not intended as dedicatory inscriptions to be mounted on walls but were to be handled while read.

4.4. The famous bronze *haruspicina* (liver divination) model Settima (3C–1C BC) is not precisely a metal plate but is nonetheless an example of sacred prophetic writing on bronze.

That the three oldest Etruscan texts of any length (4.1, 4.2, 4.3) are all sacred writing on metal is certainly indicative that the practice was widespread in pre-Roman Italy. The dual Phoenician/Etruscan inscription from Pyrgi (4.2, 2.9) indicates that the practice was most likely adopted from Phoenicia, where examples of writing sacred texts on metal plates date much earlier.

The fact that gold, bronze, and lead metal plates are durable explains in part for the unique survival of these documents, but metal plates, being quite valuable, would have been collected by scavengers and melted for reuse, whereas stone inscriptions would generally be ignored. Thus, it is quite significant that the three oldest Etruscan documents of any length are all sacred writings on metal plates,

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55. Bonfante and Bonfante, *Etruscan Language*, 49.

56. Fred Woudhuizen, *The Language of the Sea Peoples* (Amsterdam: Najade, 1992), 195–228, provides references to earlier bibliography. See Luisa Banti, *Etruscan Cities and Their Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 196. An Etruscan lead tablet of Minerva (from Punta della Vipera in Santa Marinella) is also inscribed on both sides (Banti, *Etruscan Cities*, 196).

showing a close connection with an antecedent Phoenician practice.<sup>57</sup> The Book of Mormon describes sacred writing on bronze and gold plates in the early sixth century BC at precisely the time when we find the earliest evidence of the spread of this practice from Phoenicia to Carthage, Italy, and Greece.

Although Etruscan inscriptions predominate in pre-third-century Italy, there are also non-Etruscan examples of sacred writings on metal plates.

4.5. The Twelve Tablets of the Law (*lex duodecim tabularum*) were a set of twelve bronze plates set up in the forum of Rome as early as 449 BC.<sup>58</sup> Some of the legal ideas, and presumably the custom of engraving the text of the laws on bronze plates,<sup>59</sup> were said to have been adopted from the Greeks.<sup>60</sup> The sacred law (*sacrata lex*)<sup>61</sup> inscribed on these bronze plates could not be changed; writing them on metal was thus a means of preserving a pristine copy.<sup>62</sup> The law code was originally engraved on ten tablets or plates (*decem tabularum leges*), to which two additional tablets were later added.<sup>63</sup> The original tablets were destroyed in the sack of Rome by the Gauls in 391 BC, but they were apparently reinscribed shortly thereafter.<sup>64</sup>

4.6. Bronze inscriptions of laws were fundamental in early Italy. Indeed, “any knowledge of the municipal system evolved in Italy after the Social War must turn . . . upon the four [Latin] bronze inscriptions [of laws].”<sup>65</sup> Frederiksen adds that “from earliest times until the age

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57. Examples of sacred writing on metal plates tend to be in lead, bronze, and gold. The widespread use of lead was due to the fact that it was easier to work with than bronze but was far less valuable than gold and therefore would more likely survive plundering.

58. The basic narrative sources for the Twelve Tablets of the Law are Livy 3.31–37, 57; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 10.55–60, and Diodorus Siculus 12.26.

59. Livy 3.57.10; Diodorus Siculus 12.26; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 10.57.7.

60. Livy 3.31.8; 3.33.5.

61. Livy 3.32.7.

62. The Twelve Tablets contained both sacred and secular laws; the latter could be changed by the will of the people.

63. Livy 3.34.6–7.

64. Livy 5.40; based on the standard interpretation of Livy 6.1.10.

65. M. W. Frederiksen, “The Republican Municipal Laws: Errors and Drafts,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 55/1–2 (1965): 183, with full bibliographic data. For additional examples of Roman bronze plates, see Gregory Bucher, “The *Annales Maximi* in the Light of the

of Augustus bronze was the usual form of publication in Italy. Unlike Greece, Italy had few kinds of stone suited to the inscription of long texts until the heavy Augustan exploitation of the Luna quarries; she had, however, again unlike Greece, good supplies of bronze—a fact which more than any other explains the relative epigraphic paucity of Greek and Republican Italy.”<sup>66</sup> This is because, unlike stone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions tended to be collected, melted, and reused. “Important inscriptions were probably inscribed on bronze tablets, and were destroyed in antiquity. Bronze was a useful metal so the tablets were melted down and re-used.”<sup>67</sup>

4.7. One of the most interesting Italic examples of sacred writing on metal plates is the Iguvium plates (3C BC), written in the Umbrian dialect of the Italic language family.<sup>68</sup> Of the seven plates, five have writing on both sides, containing a total of around 4,000 words. These texts contain the rituals and sacrifices to be performed by a clan of Umbrian priests and thus are sociologically the equivalent of parts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which the Book of Mormon claims were on the Hebrew bronze plates.

The Iguvium plates are substantially larger than the golden plates of the Book of Mormon. They range from 33x22 to 16x12 inches, while the golden plates seem to have been about 8x6 inches, thus about a fourth of the size of the smaller Iguvium plates. Although the Iguvium collection as a whole contains 4,000 words in Umbrian, the English translation tends to include about twice as many words, or an approximately 8,000-word English equivalent. However, the large Iguvium plates have large

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Roman Methods of Keeping Records,” *American Journal of Ancient History* 12/1 (1987): 3–4, 33–34.

66. Frederiksen, “Republican Municipal Laws,” 186.

67. Banti, *Etruscan Cities and Their Culture*, 197. The extraordinary paucity of Hebrew royal or religious inscriptions from the First Temple period could be explained if we were to assume that the Hebrews, like the Romans, wrote their royal inscriptions in bronze, which were later plundered and destroyed, precisely as happened to most early Roman examples. For a brief discussion, see William J. Hamblin, review of *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon*, by Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 261–63. For all Hebrew inscriptions, see Graham I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

68. James W. Poultney, *The Bronze Tables of Iguvium* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959).

letters (54 lines in 33 inches, or over half an inch high characters) and include characters for vowels, which were undoubtedly absent from the Book of Mormon text. Furthermore, the Book of Mormon was written in reformed Egyptian, which seems to have been a special script designed to reduce the space for characters.

Using the Iguvium plates as a test case, it is possible to make a broad comparison between them and the number of words said to have been found on the twenty-four plates of Ether. The plates of Ether contained the equivalent of about 17,000 English words. This includes several hundred words of commentary by Mormon, but excludes an early version of the primeval history (Genesis 1–10, which amounts to about an additional 6,500 words in English). Thus, the total English word equivalent on the twenty-four plates is roughly 24,000 English words (17,000 in Ether plus 6,500 from Genesis 1–10), which equates to about 1,000 English words per plate (500 words per side). This compares favorably with the equivalent of 8,000 English words on six Iguvium plates (five double-sided and two single-sided), or 1,350 English words per plate (675 per side). Allowing for a slightly smaller character size in the Book of Mormon text and a writing system without vowels to offset the larger side of the Iguvium plates, this anthology with the Iguvium plates demonstrates that it is quite reasonable for the twenty-four plates of Ether to have contained both the book of Ether and Genesis 1–10.

4.8. Although these archaeologically surviving examples are few in number, there is literary evidence confirming that a vast number of bronze plates were produced in antiquity. For example, in the great fire in Rome in AD 80, approximately 3,000 bronze tablets are said to have been destroyed.<sup>69</sup>

## Summary

Based on these examples of Hebrew, Phoenician, Greek, and Italic practices, we can conclude that writing and preserving sacred bronze and gold plates was a widespread phenomenon in the eastern

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69. Wright, "Metallic Documents in Antiquity," 460–61.

Mediterranean world at the time of Lehi. These bronze plates were frequently associated with four genres:

1. Ritual: recording and performing the sacred rites of priestly clans (1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1, 2.6, 2.7, 2.9, 3.3, 3.5, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.7).

2. Laws: preserving a permanent record of the community's laws (1.3, 4.5, 4.6).

3. Prophecies and divination: performing divination or preserving important prophecies or oracles (1.5, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2, 3.7, 4.4).

4. History: preserving inscriptions of important treaties and other historical developments (1.3, 2.5, 2.8, 3.1, 3.6).

These genres broadly match the described contents of the bronze plates in the Book of Mormon. “And he [Lehi] beheld that they [the bronze plates] did contain [1] the five books of Moses . . . [2] a record of the Jews from the beginning . . . [3] and also the prophecies of the holy prophets” (1 Nephi 5:11–13). In other words, in traditional Jewish designation, the bronze plates contained the Law (*torah*), the Prophets (*nevi'im*), and the Writings (*ketuvim*), all of which genres are found recorded on sacred metal plates in the pre-Christian Mediterranean.

The examples provided in this essay demonstrate that sacred writing on metal plates was a widespread phenomenon in the Semitic Near East and the eastern Mediterranean world in the centuries just before and after Lehi. This conclusion has also been drawn by Walter Burkert. In his 1992 study of the cultural dependency of Greek civilization on the Near East, Burkert presented a short analysis of the spread of the alphabet and writing styles and materials from the Near East to Greece. In his discussion he states that “the reference to ‘bronze *deltoi* [plates or tablets]’ as a term [among the Greeks] for ancient sacral laws should point back to seventh or sixth century [BC]” as the period in which the term *deltos* and the practice of writing on bronze plates was transmitted from the Near East to Greece.<sup>70</sup> For students of the Book of Mormon, it is not at all surprising that in the seventh or sixth century BC, the practice of writing on bronze plates was adopted by the Greeks from the Phoenicians, along with the term bronze plates (*deltos*, from

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70. Burkert, *Orientalizing Revolution*, 30.

Phoenician/Hebrew *dlt*) to describe “ancient sacred laws.”<sup>71</sup> This is, of course, precisely the time and place in which the Book of Mormon claims that a set of bronze plates containing the “ancient sacred laws” of the Hebrews existed.

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71. Burkert, *Orientalizing Revolution*, 30; cf. Pollox, *Onomasticon* 8.128, in *Pollucis Onomasticon*, 2:141.