

The Plates of the Book of Mormon



According to the accounts of those involved as witnesses to the plates and those involved with the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, Jr. received a six inch thick, six inch wide by 8 inches long¹ set of golden plates weighing between 40-60 pounds² from the angel Moroni, which contained a record of ancient American civilizations and their interactions with God.³

The plates are a foundational aspect of the faith of believing members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and were translated by Joseph Smith by the power of God. Here's a description of the plates and their contents:

The Plates: The plates were described as a set of gold or gold-like metal plates, bound together in a stack resembling a book. They were said to be about 6 inches wide and 8 inches long, with the thickness of the plates varying. The entire set was held together by three D-shaped rings running through holes in the plates. The plates were engraved on both sides with ancient characters that Joseph Smith referred to as "reformed Egyptian."

David Whitmer, Martin Harris, and Orson Pratt collectively described the method of binding the set of plates with three rings. David Whitmer elaborated further, mentioning that these rings weren't round, but took on the shape of a capital "D," with the straight edge of the "D" passing through the plates. Martin Harris specifically noted that the rings were crafted from silver. Additional testimonies support the "D" shape of the binding rings, including interviews with John Whitmer by P. Wilhelm Poulson, documented in the *Deseret News* of August 6, 1878, and with David Whitmer by Edward Stevenson on December 22-23, 1877, found in the Family and Church History Department Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Richard Lloyd Anderson's article "Attempts to Redefine the Experiences

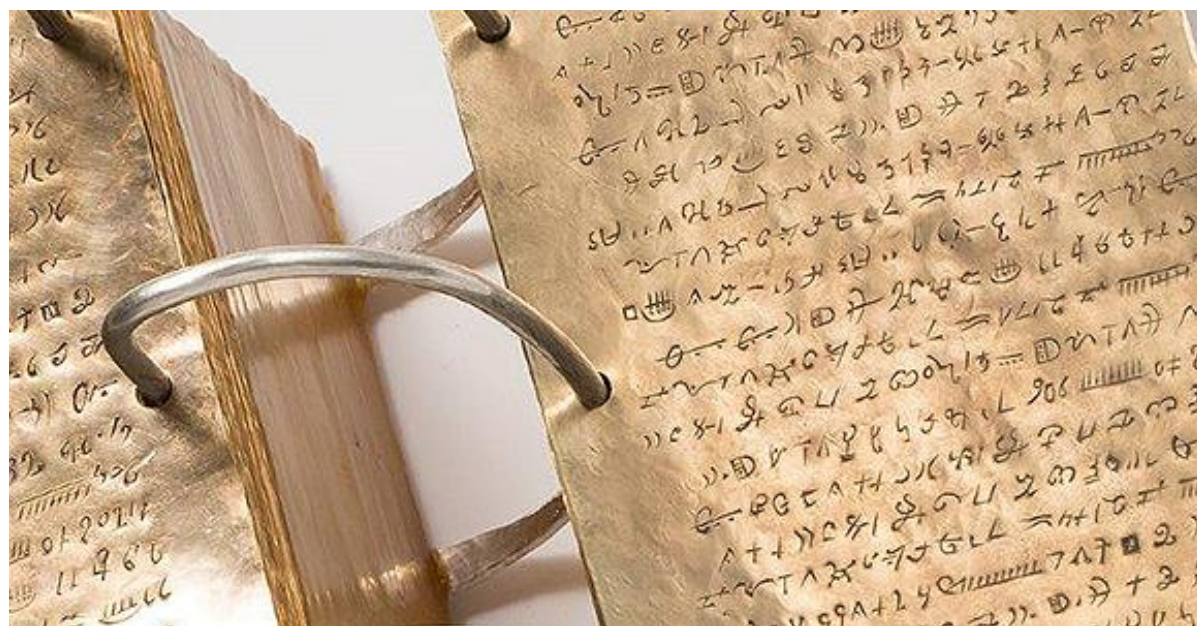
¹ Joseph Smith said that the plates were six inches wide by eight inches long. Wentworth Letter, 707. Martin Harris stated that they were 7x8 inches. Kirk B. Henrichsen, "[What Did the Golden Plates Look Like?](#)" *New Era*, July 2007. Joseph said the plates were six inches thick in *History of the Church*, 4:537.

² How Much Did the Plates Weigh? "*Weighing altogether, from forty to sixty lbs.*" Martin Harris, *Iowa State Register*, Aug. 1870, in Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (1983), 226. Emma stated: "*I moved them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my work.*" Emma Smith, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *The Saints' Herald*, Oct. 1, 1879, 290. Henrichsen relates, "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." See: Kirk B. Henrichsen's article, "[What Did the Golden Plates Look Like?](#)" *New Era*, July 2007.

³ Joseph Smith stated that in September 1823, he was visited by the angel Moroni, who informed him about a record engraved on golden plates. Moroni explained that the plates contained a history of ancient American civilizations and their interactions with God. Joseph Smith was told that he had been chosen to translate this record by the power of God. After several visits from the angel Moroni over the course of four years, Joseph Smith said he was finally allowed to retrieve the golden plates on September 22, 1827. He found the plates in a stone box in a hill near his home in Manchester, New York, commonly referred to as the Hill Cumorah. Along with the plates, Joseph Smith reported finding other artifacts, including a breastplate and the Urim and Thummim, which he used in the process of translation. The plates were not immediately translated after their retrieval. Joseph Smith stated that he spent several years preparing himself spiritually and learning how to translate the characters on the plates. The actual process of translating the plates into what would become the Book of Mormon began in 1828 and continued until June 1829, when the translation was completed. See [Book of Mormon Translation Timeline](#).

of the Eight Witnesses" in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 14/1 (2005), further adds to this evidence. **This seemingly minor observation, however, carries substantial significance for the Book of Mormon's authenticity.**

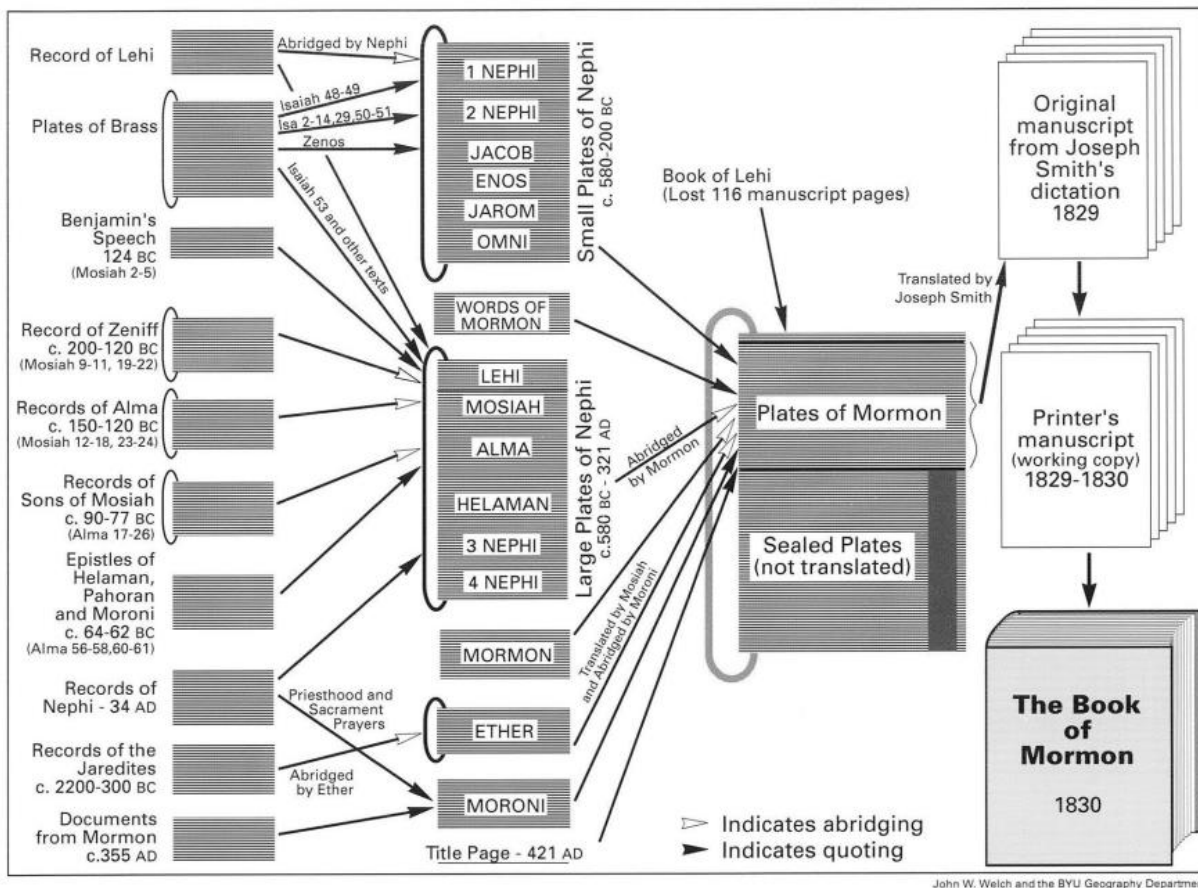
The shape of the binding rings is a critical piece of evidence for the Book of Mormon's validity. **The "D" shaped rings allow the metal plates to be stacked vertically against the straight side of the rings, resulting in a 50 percent greater storage capacity compared to circular rings.** This design would have been advantageous for the Book of Mormon prophets who diligently inscribed their records onto metal plates, where available space was a crucial factor. This historical observation also connects with modern developments in loose-leaf binders. The concept of a loose-leaf binder patent was filed in 1854 by [Henry T. Sisson](#), a colonel in the Union Army during the Civil War, and was secured in 1859.⁴ The first two-ring binders were advertised for sale in 1899.⁵ Over time, the use of three rings proved to be a more stable design, becoming the standard. Notably, the early designs featured circular or oval-shaped rings. Intriguingly, another ancient metal record bound by rings, dating to approximately 600 BC, has been discovered with "D"-shaped rings. This finding was reported in "Etruscan Gold Book from 600 BC Discovered," and a photograph can be found in [Insights 23/5 \(2003\)](#).⁶



⁴ This patent marked the beginning of the development and commercialization of loose leaf binders, which allowed for the flexible arrangement of documents and papers within a binder. The first binder went on sale in the United States in 1899. [The Chicago Binder and File Company](#) sold this binder. The concept of loose leaf binding revolutionized the way information and documents were organized and stored, leading to the development of various binder designs and formats over the years.

⁵ See: [Origins of the Three-Ring Binder](#).

⁶ The Bulgarian National Museum of History in Sofia, Bulgaria, recently placed on public display an ancient book comprising six pages of 23.82-karat gold (measuring 5 centimeters in length and 4.5 centimeters in width) bound together by gold rings. The plates contain a text written in Etruscan characters and also depict a horse, a horseman, a Siren, a lyre, and soldiers. According to Elka Penkova, who heads the museum's archaeology department, the find may be the oldest complete book in the world, dating to about 600 B.C. The content of the book suggests that it was made for the funeral of an aristocrat who was a member of the Orpheus cult



Considering the historical context, it's unlikely that Joseph Smith had knowledge of three-ring binding with "D"-shaped rings. **The evidence surrounding the shape of the binding rings adds credibility to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.**

The Contents: The plates contained several different records, including:

1. **The Book of Lehi (Stolen Pages):** This portion of the plates, often referred to as the "Book of Lehi," was later stolen from Martin Harris and was not included in the final translation of the Book of Mormon. It is said to have contained the account of Lehi, an Israelite prophet, and his family's journey from Jerusalem to the Americas, covering the history of the Nephites from Lehi's time period all the way to the reign of King Benjamin.⁷
2. **The Small Plates of Nephi:** These plates contained the record of Nephi, one of Lehi's sons. The small plates covered the same time period as the stolen manuscript (600-130 B.C.). This set of plates emphasized spiritual teachings and prophecies of the Nephite believers in Christ. Nephi specifically mentioned the space limitations and the importance of only having room to "write the things of God" upon the small plates (1 Nephi 6.1-6).
3. **The Large Plates of Nephi:** The large plates contained a more extensive historical and political record of the Nephite civilization. These plates were later abridged the prophet Mormon several hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The text covered on the Large

⁷ Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories*, Greg Kofford Books, 2019.

Plates covered the time from Lehi to the account of the peaceful existence of the Nephites in 4 Nephi. The large plates of Nephi were passed down from king to king until they came into the possession of Mosiah. He added such records as those of Zeniff and Alma to the large plates and then gave them to Alma the Younger. The plates subsequently passed through a line of prophets until Ammaron's day in the early fourth century A.D. Ammaron chose Mormon, then only a child, to continue the record when he was mature. Mormon recorded the events of his day on the large plates and then used them as the source for his abridgment, which was later buried in the hill Cumorah.⁸

4. **The Book of Mormon (Plates of Mormon):** The most prominent part of the plates was the abridged record made by Mormon, a Nephite prophet and historian. Much of this was his abridgment of the Large Plates of Nephi, as well as other historical records at his disposal. He compiled a selection of writings from the large plates and the small plates, which included histories, prophecies, sermons, and teachings from various prophets who lived in the Americas. The book covers a period of about a thousand years and tells the story of the Nephite and Lamanite civilizations, their wars, religious developments, and interactions with God.
5. **Additional Plates:** In addition to the records mentioned above, the plates included writings from other prophets and individuals, such as the Book of Ether, which recounts the history of a different civilization known as the Jaredites. Ether's writings were translated by Mosiah and abridged by Moroni.⁹
6. **The Sealed Portion:** A portion of the plates that Joseph Smith received were sealed. Joseph Smith was commanded not to translate the sealed vision of the brother of Jared, which apparently made up a substantial portion of the gold plates. Although Joseph Smith translated only from the gold plates, he and his associates saw many other records (*JD* 19:38; *Millennial Star* 40 [1878]:771- 72).¹⁰ According to Joseph Smith's associates who had the opportunity to see the golden plates, the sealed portion comprised a significant portion, ranging from around half to two-thirds of the entire plates.¹¹

How much of the record was "sealed"?

The precise extent of the sealed portion of the plates remains an area of uncertainty. Various accounts from notable figures contribute to the discussion. Orson Pratt, a prominent figure, asserted that two-thirds of the plates were sealed—a perspective that gained significant traction due to Pratt's esteemed writings (*Journal of Discourses*, 3:347). David Whitmer, one of the three special witnesses who had the privilege of directly viewing the plates, is documented as having conveyed that "about the half of the book was sealed" (P. Wilhelm Poulsen, *Deseret Evening News*, August 16, 1878, 11:2). Whitmer provided further insight on a separate occasion, indicating that "one-third appeared to be loose," and describing the sealed portion as possessing an appearance that was "as solid to my view as wood" (Cook, Lyndon

⁸ Grant Hardy, Robert Parsons, [Book of Mormon Plates and Records](#), *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Macmillan Publishing, 1992, p. 199.

⁹ Hardy and Parsons, p. 196.

¹⁰ Hardy and Parsons, p. 198.

¹¹ Kirk B. Henrichsen, ["What Did the Golden Plates Look Like?"](#) *New Era*, July 2007.

W., ed. *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991], 20-21, 75). Elder George Q. Cannon penned an account suggesting that one-third of the plates were sealed ("The Latter-day Prophet: History of Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, 1900). Joseph Smith himself offered a succinct remark, mentioning, "The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed" (*History of the Church*, 4:537). In light of these various perspectives, the range of conjectures concerning the proportion of the plates that were sealed spans from approximately one-third to as much as two-thirds.

Joseph Smith translated the contents of these plates by the power of God in approximately 75 days in the Spring of 1829, beginning in Mosiah on April 7, 1829 and finishing translating the Small Plates on June 30, 1829.¹² The translation is known today as the Book of Mormon, which is considered by Latter-day Saints to be another testament of Jesus Christ and a companion to the Bible.

¹² See: [Book of Mormon Translation Timeline](#).