

Book of Mormon from just two inches worth of plates.

Mormon apologists often refer to LDS metallurgist Read H. Putnam for details. Putnam claimed that if “each plate were .02 of an inch thick, it would occupy up to .05 of an inch in the stack, and there would be 20 plates to the inch. The unsealed portion would then consist of 40 plates or 80 sides.” When the *Book of Mormon* was published in 1830, it contained 588 pages of text; so in essence, we must believe that 588 paper pages of text could be engraved in readable fashion on 80 plates (assuming both sides could be used). That means that each engraved plate contained 7.35 paper pages worth of text. Let us not forget that the 588-page 1830 edition also failed to include the 116 manuscript pages of text lost by Martin Harris. This text was also included in the 2-inch unsealed portion.

Putnam states that the plates could not have been made “of an extremely low-gold alloy because of the danger of electrolysis and brittleness. On the other hand, they were probably not an alloy of an extremely high-gold alloy either, since the weight would thereby be increased.” Putnam then alleges that the plates, probably made of an alloy called tumbaga, were “probably between 8–and-12 carat gold” and “weighed between 53 and 86 pounds” (*Improvement Era*, Vol.69, No.9, p.788ff).

We challenge Mormons to carry 53-86 pounds under their arm for any distance, much less three miles. This is comparable to carrying a 60 pound bag of redicrete concrete mix, or two 8x8x16-inch concrete blocks (70 lbs.). Remember Smith also at times had to run at the “top of his speed” to avoid those who were trying to steal the plates from him.

Putnam insists (like Widtsoe) that the “plates were not so heavy that a man could not carry them...we are not led to believe that the weight of the plates was a great hindrance.”

J.M. Sjodahl, in an article printed in The LDS publication *Improvement Era*, concurred that the plates were not too difficult to carry when he stated that “the plates were not heavier than that the Prophet,

who was an unusually strong man, physically and intellectually, could lift and handle them. This is the testimony of eye witnesses. And that testimony stands” (“The Book of Mormon Plates,” *Improvement Era*, April 1923, No.6).

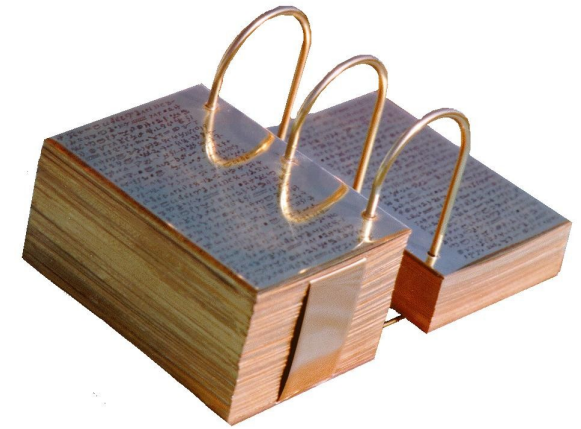
Supernatural Strength?

Mormons who have actually tried to lift such a heavy load quickly see that the above explanations become tenuous. There is no possible way even a young man like Smith could carry such a weight and do what Mormons claim he did. When faced with such overwhelming facts, Mormons often reject the testimony of Widtsoe, Putnam, and Sjodahl, and insist that Smith was “helped by the spirit” to carry such an incredible weight. However, if supernatural strength was involved it seems odd that Smith never gives God the glory for such a miracle. The same goes for the few who were allowed to lift what they thought were gold plates.

For example, according to Mormon historian Richard L. Bushman, there were times when the plates, “wrapped in a linen cloth,” lay on Joseph and Emma Smith’s table. According to Bushman, Emma “occasionally moved them around on the table as her work required it” (*Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 95). Emma never attributes this ability to supernatural strength.

Furthermore, if Smith really had supernatural strength, why are Mormon apologists bending over backwards to get the weight of the plates down to what they feel is a reasonable level? Such efforts would be completely unnecessary. No doubt it is because they know this is not a reasonable argument in light of recorded Mormon history.

All we ask is that Mormons look more carefully into the details of this story, for if this story is not true, what other aspects of Mormonism are also not true?



How Heavy were those gold plates?

Paramount in the story of the Latter-day Saints is the account given by Joseph Smith of a visitation he received from the angel Moroni on September 21, 1823. He stated that after he retired to bed, his room became filled with light. At his bedside stood an angel who called Smith by name and told him that God had a work for the young boy to do. Smith claimed to have been told how, “there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang” (*Joseph Smith – History* 1:34).

Smith claimed that he was not allowed to retrieve the buried plates for another four years. In verse 54 of his testimony, he related that the day he was allowed to dig up the record came on September 22, 1827. His mother, Lucy Mack Smith, remembered the day this way:

The plates were secreted about three miles from home... Joseph, on coming to them, took them from their secret place, and, wrapping them in his linen frock, **placed them under his arm** and started for home.

After proceeding a short distance, he thought it would be more safe to leave the road and go through the woods. Traveling some distance after he left the road, he came to a large windfall, and as **he was jumping over a log**, a man sprang up from behind it, and gave him a heavy blow with a gun. Joseph turned around and knocked him down, then **ran at the top of his speed**. About half a mile further he was attacked again in the same manner as before; he knocked this man down in like manner as the former, and **ran on again**; and before he reached home he was assaulted the third time. In striking the last one he dislocated his thumb, which, however, he did not notice until he came within sight of the house, when he threw himself down in the corner of the fence in order to recover his breath. As soon as he was able, he arose and came to the house. He was still altogether speechless from fright and the **fatigue of running** (*History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, Lucy Smith*, 107-108. Richard L. Bushman retells this same story in *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 60. Emphasis ours).

Joseph Smith stated,

These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings, in Egyptian characters, and bound together in a volume as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness,

a part of which was sealed (*History of the Church* 4:537).

Numerous LDS leaders and historians have concurred with Smith's dimensions.

Paintings and sculptures of Smith show him receiving the plates with outstretched arms or resting on his knee. Although these are just an artist's perception, these descriptions do cause us to ask, "If they really existed, just how heavy would those plates have been, given the size and description by Smith?" Mormon apologists have given all sorts of possible weights, most of them based on arbitrary factors.

We do know that gold weighs about 1200 pounds per cubic foot. Given the dimensions by Smith (6x8x6 inches), his plates were 1/6 of a cubic foot. One sixth of 1200 equals 200 pounds. Some have argued that Smith's plates would have been lighter by assuming that the plates would have had "air gaps" between each plate. However, the dense weight and softness of plates made of gold, and the stacked arrangement of the pages, would easily cause the plates to flatten out. This would also hold true if inscribing the plates caused an indentation or bulge. Such indentions would also limit the text to one side since a bulge would make reading the text on the opposite side impossible.

Mormon Apostle John Widtsoe is one of many Mormons who have abandoned the notion that the plates were made of gold as Moroni said. He concluded that the plates were made of a lighter alloy that was composed of primarily copper with some gold. He said:

If the plates were made of eight karat gold, which is gold frequently used in present-day jewelry, and allowing a 10 percent space between the leaves, the total weight of the plates would not be above one hundred and seventeen pounds—a weight easily carried by a man as strong as was Joseph Smith (John A. Widtsoe and Franklin S. Harris, Jr., *Seven Claims of the Book of Mormon*, p. 37).

Widtsoe's conclusion that the plates were 8 carat gold would mean that gold made up 33% of the metal in-



One of several artist's renditions of Smith receiving the gold plates from Moroni.

cluded in the plates. Could a young man like Smith "easily" carry 117 pounds worth of plates? A facsimile set of plates made of lead are on display at the Utah Lighthouse Bookstore located at 1385 West Temple, in Salt Lake City. Lead weighs 711 pounds per cubic foot (copper weighs 550 pounds per cubic foot). These plates are the exact size given by Smith and weigh 118 pounds, or only one pound more than the estimate given by Apostle Widtsoe. The lead plates, being dense and soft like gold, have no air gap as surmised by Widtsoe. The lead facsimile plates are not at all easy to pick up, much less carry for any considerable distance either walking or running.

So Mormon apologists have had to come up with another solution. As with Widtsoe, they reject the notion that the plates were actually made of gold and then turn their attention to the supposed "air space" between the plates." Widtsoe used an arbitrary number of ten percent. Knowing this is not nearly enough needed to get the plates down to a manageable weight, modern apologists have suggested as much as a 50% air gap between each plate! This conclusion crosses the line to absurdity when you consider that the more "air space" you place between the plates, the less plates Smith had to work with.

Remember, Smith said the plates were six inches thick and that 2/3 of the plates were sealed and were not a part of the *Book of Mormon*. If 2/3 of the plates were sealed that means Smith translated the entire