

# The Gold Plates

by Thomas B. Griffith (Humanities '78)



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I'm haunted by Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *The Remains of the Day*. The protagonist, who is the perfect butler, had no way of knowing while confined to the small world of the manor he served so diligently that what he thought was the great contribution he was making to his beloved England through his diligent service to the lord of the manor was built on a lie. It was only when he ventured beyond the manor that he was able to learn the truth. I never want my thinking to be confined to the manor. I don't want to be fooled.

Which brings me to Richard Bushman's latest book, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History*, which aims to understand "[h]ow people of all persuasions [have] accounted for the plates."<sup>1</sup> Bushman points out that a belief that the plates were what Joseph Smith claimed "makes a big difference in one's outlook on the world. With the plates comes an angel and divine intervention in ordinary human lives. The plates imply a world where God is an active agent in human affairs in opposition to the skepticism that has eroded religion for the past 200 years."<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, the gold plates serve much the same role for Latter-day Saint Christians as the bodily resurrection of Jesus plays for all Christians. The authors of the New Testament asserted that, with the bodily resurrection of Jesus, "history has been invaded by God in Christ in such a way that nothing can stay as it was. All terms of human community and conduct have been altered at the deepest levels."<sup>3</sup> The claim that the New Testament story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a historical reality is both the strength of the Christian witness and its greatest vulnerability. As Ross Douthat observes, "[T]he Christian story . . . recounts a series of events that, *if real*, tell us something profound about the nature of God and His relationship to His creatures."<sup>4</sup> "If real." There's the rub. Was the story of the bodily resurrection of Jesus real? Or was it, in the words of 2 Peter 1:16 (NRSV), a "cleverly devised myth"?

The same tension exists with respect to the claim of Latter-day Saints that recent history has been "invaded by God in Christ," this time through the Restoration of His gospel beginning in 19th-century America. This updated version of the Christian story also "recounts a series of events that, *if real*, tell us something profound about the

nature of God and His relationship to His creatures." But are *those events* real?

Eyewitness accounts of the bodily resurrection of Jesus fueled the faith of the earliest Christians. People they trusted claimed that they saw, heard, touched, and even shared a meal with the Risen Christ. So, too, with the story of the Latter-day Saints. At the heart of their story is the claim of a miracle: an angel gave to Joseph Smith the gold plates from which this unlettered man miraculously produced the Book of Mormon. The book is an account of an ancient peoples' encounter with the Risen Christ that is intended to bolster the New Testament witness of Christ in a secular age. As with the first Christians, eyewitnesses claim that this modern miracle is a historical reality. Those gold plates were seen, touched, hefted, and examined by many who then believed that history had once again "been invaded by God in Christ" in a way that changed everything. And while we know little about the ancient New Testament eyewitnesses, we know much about the more recent eyewitnesses to the gold plates who left abundant records of their lives, and we have the text of the Book of Mormon to study and analyze.

I do not come to faith easily. Skepticism has served me well. On the strength of the eyewitness descriptions of the gold plates, I'm persuaded that they were real. That's the easy part. The more intriguing and important issue is raised by the possibility that the gold plates and the complex and profound text that emerged from their translation were part of a modern miracle. If so, they are a marker that there may be more to reality than what I can see, touch, feel, and measure. The gold plates prod the skeptic to allow for the possibility that reality includes God and Christ and angels and moral laws that shape and mold us into different types of beings than we might otherwise be, and that God in Christ has undertaken a major project for all the world in our time. When I choose to accept that reality, my life is different and better. And when my vision of that reality becomes blurry, when I worry that perhaps I am like the misguided butler in *The Remains of the Day*, I recall the gold plates, the eyewitnesses to their historical reality, the text they contained, and the miracle they present to a skeptical world and a skeptical me. ■

1. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History*, xi (Oxford 2023).

2. *Ibid.*, ix.

3. David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation*, xxiii-xxiv (Yale 2017).

4. Ross Douthat, "The Implications of Christmas," *The Atlantic*, [bit.ly/archivechristmas](https://www.theatlantic.com/archive/christmas/) (December 25, 2008).