

Response to Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham

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The Essay

The essay on “Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham” starts by stating that the LDS Church embraces the book as scripture.¹ It proclaims that it is a record of the biblical patriarch Abraham and as such tells that he wanted the priesthood and “received knowledge about the Creation.” The book adds to what is known about the life and teachings of Abraham.

The second paragraph states that the book of Abraham was published in 1842 and included in the Pearl of Great Price that was canonized by an LDS Church conference in 1880. It is stated that the book originated with Egyptian papyri and that it is impossible to reconstruct how it was done as only small fragments now exist. It is conjecture about the relationship of the book’s text and those fragments.

Having stated the above, the essay says that the book of Abraham “is consistent with historical knowledge about the ancient world.” But even this cannot prove the book is true. As scripture “the book of Abraham supports, expands, and clarifies the biblical account of Abraham’s life.” Three paragraphs briefly summarize the content of the book.

Another section tells about the origin of the book, purchased in 1835, with one of the papyri rolls being the writings of Abraham. Though Joseph Smith did not know ancient languages he worked on an Egyptian grammar soon after purchasing the papyri. Next is a lengthy part concerning the papyri that came back into the possession of the LDS Church in 1967.

The essay mentions that “None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mention Abraham’s name or any of the events recorded in the book of Abraham.” The papyrus fragments date “long after Abraham lived.” The records could be copies, redacted later and the illustrations also could have no connection with Abraham. The process of obtaining the text could be by revelation.

The book of Abraham fits into the ancient world view and helps the claim of its historicity as an ancient record. The book is against human sacrifice and rejects the worship of idols. Explanations of the Abraham facsimiles by Joseph Smith have “earmarks of the ancient world.” Abraham taught astronomy to Egyptians. Some ancient traditions were known in Joseph Smith’s time and some were not.

The essay concludes by explaining that scholarly debate cannot settle the veracity and value or its status as scripture. Only through “study, prayer, and spiritual confirmation” can its truth be found.

¹ “Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham,” posted on www.lds.org, (under Gospel Topics), July 8, 2014.

Response

As the essay indicates, the book of Abraham is considered scripture and can be accepted as such by “study, prayer, and spiritual confirmation.” It is also possible to understand by using historical methods to develop what the ancient text says. In this response I will explain some of the history and development of what is accepted as the writings of Abraham and how it relates to the interest in America of artifacts from Egypt. The essay is important in what it says concerning the name Abraham and whether the story recounted in the book is connected with one of the Egyptian papyri.

ACQUIRING THE EGYPTIAN PAPYRI

In July 1835, one hundred eighty years ago, members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, purchased four Egyptian mummies and some papyri. Soon after church prophet-president Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-44) worked on an “Egyptian Alphabet” that is connected with the first illustration of the ancient papyrus. The papyrus was damaged and in order to preserve the beginning of the Egyptian papyrus it was attached to paper. The first illustration was “restored” and published in the church newspaper *Times and Seasons* in March 1842. It was called “A FAC-SIMILE FROM THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM. NO. 1” though it is not an exact reproduction of the original.

The claim was that this record was the “Book of Abraham” and that it was written by him on papyrus in ancient times, “while he was in Egypt.” If this writing was produced by Abraham, father of the Hebrew nation, it would be the oldest known document relating to the Hebrew Scriptures. Whether the “Book of Abraham” is an ancient record is a logical question. Though the printed book in the English language is no more than fifteen pages, it is important to consider whether it is a recent production or an ancient one.

The individual who sold the papyri and Egyptian mummies to the LDS Church was Michael H. Chandler (circa 1797-1866). He was impressed with church president Joseph Smith. With the artifacts there was a printed placard that explained the mummies “may have lived in the days of Jacob, Moses, or David” and the papyri with their ancient writing “will be exhibited with the Mummies.”² Smith believed that one of the papyrus rolls contained the writings of Abraham and the other the writings of Joseph. He showed Michael Chandler some characters on the papyrus that he said were similar to the characters found on the Book of Mormon gold plates.³ For these reasons, Smith decided to purchase the relics. Chandler presented the following certificate to Smith before the purchase was made:

Kirtland, July 6th, 1835.

This is to make known to all who may be desirous, concerning the knowledge of Mr. Joseph Smith, jr. in deciphering the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic characters, in my possession, which I have, in many eminent cities, shown to the most learned:

² “Egyptian Antiquities,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 13 (May 2, 1842):774, Nauvoo, Illinois.

³ Oliver Cowdery, Letter to William Frye, December 22, 1835, Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, 72, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California; published in *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 3 (December 1835):235, Kirtland, Ohio.

And, from the information that I could learn, or meet with, I find that [i.e., the translation] of Mr. Joseph Smith, jr. to correspond in the most minute matters.

(Signed) Michael H. Chandler.

Travelling with, and proprietor of Egyptian Mummies.⁴

Chandler's asking price for the items was \$2,400, a substantial amount considering the expenditures Smith's church was incurring in constructing the large meetinghouse to be known as the Kirtland House of the Lord, or Kirtland Temple. According to Joseph Coe (1784-1854), arrangements were made to make the purchase before Chandler left Kirtland. Coe explained eight years later, in 1844, that Chandler was merely the agent for the real owners of the relics: "Previous t[o] closing the contra[c]t with Chandler I made ar[r]angements with S[imeon]. Andrews for to take one third part and your self [Joseph Smith] & Co. one third leaving one third to be borne by myself.... Chandler was only an agent acting for some men in Philadelphia."⁵

CONTENTS OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

The Pearl of Great Price (2013 edition) has five separate items in its contents and is the only LDS scripture with illustrations. The Book of Abraham is divided into five chapters containing 136 verses. The most interesting aspect of the book is that it includes three illustrations. The first illustration is mentioned twice in the opening chapter of the book.

The papyrus that was used to render the text of what was considered Abraham's record has a relationship to the three printed illustrations. The book is unique in that the illustrations are considered part of Joseph Smith's book of Abraham. The Egyptian papyrus was in the same language family reported to have been written on the plates of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith soon obtained by divine revelation the information that the Egyptian writing contained the teachings of Abraham and also a sacred record of Joseph. This was the reason he desired to pay \$2,400 for the papyri and mummies.

William W. Phelps (1792-1872), Warren Parrish (1803-77), and John Whitmer (1802-78), scribes and church historian, each mention that Smith when he saw the Egyptian records knew by revelation he could "translate" the Egyptian characters. God ordered that the ancient artifacts that Chandler exhibited should come into the possession of the church. Joseph Smith indicated that he could decipher the hidden language of the ancient Egyptians. To Smith the rolls of papyri were ancient records and would be of great value to the saints.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Coe, Letter to Joseph Smith, January 1, 1844, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter LDS Church History Library. It is not known how the one-third share was finally disposed of as the Smith family retained the mummies and papyri. Joseph Smith replied to Coe, "I have got your Deed...for all the interest you ever held in the Mummies" (Smith, Copy of letter to Coe, January 18, 1844, LDS Church History Library; see Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, Rev. Ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co./Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 593.

⁶ H. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*, 2nd ed. (Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2013), 237-48.

The story in the first two chapters consists of Abraham's desire to be ordained and become a high priest, the attempted sacrifice of Abraham on an altar, the patriarchal priesthood, and the first person account of his travels. The final three chapters explain information on a pre-earth life and the order of creation.

Joseph Smith believed that the damaged papyrus was the writing of Abraham. The first and third illustrations came from the same papyrus roll. The first one is extant while the third is lost. The second round illustration, like the third, is lost but characters from the original papyrus were included as they filled in the places missing from the lost original.

There were two time periods when the text was dictated to scribes. They are (1) Abraham 1:1 to 2:18 at Kirtland, Ohio in 1835 and (2) explanations of the illustrations and Abraham 2:19 to 5:21 at Nauvoo, Illinois in 1842.

The first thing to consider is whether the papyrus is somehow connected with the writing of Abraham. The printed text reports that Abraham tells his audience: "and that you might have knowledge of this altar, I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record."⁷ The representation is to the first illustration at the front of the book. So it is known that the writing is connected with the papyrus. The English text is clear on this point. The record also states:

And I, Abraham, journeyed, going on still towards the South; and there was a continuation of a famine in the Land, and I Abraham concluded to go down into Egypt, to sojourn there, for the famine became very grievous."⁸

What is of interest is that this short excerpt from the story is similar to the book of Genesis. The earlier name Abram is included before his name was changed to Abraham. For comparison purposes the King James Version of Genesis is used and similar words are highlighted in **bold**:

And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south. And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land.⁹

Except for six words the text is the same. By close comparison what is found is that this part of the story, represented to have been written by Abraham, is already found in the book of Genesis coming from the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures. The essay mentions the historicity of the record and indeed the texts of Genesis 11:28-29 and Genesis 12:1-13 were used, some with revisions, in the composition of the "Book of Abraham." About 48% (66 verses) of the story follow the Genesis account.

An emphasis on priesthood authority was an important topic in the LDS Church in 1835. Joseph Smith Sr. (1771-1840) was apparently appointed as the Church's first ordained patriarch in December 1834. As a patriarch he would pronounce blessings on church members, assigning to

⁷ "The Book of Abraham," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842):704; see Abraham 1:12, also verse 14.

⁸ *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842):719; see Abraham 2:21.

⁹ Genesis 12:9-10, King James Version.

them a lineage mainly of one of the sons of Jacob in the book of Genesis. He usually predicted prophetic insight for the individual to follow and what heavenly blessings they could obtain if faithful. The prophet Joseph Smith Jr. wanted to trace the Church's new office of patriarch back to biblical times. He taught in April 1835 that the patriarchal priesthood "was confirmed to be handed down from father to son, and rightly belongs to the literal descendants of the chosen seed, to whom the promises were made."¹⁰ A listing, including the line of this heavenly authority from Adam to Noah, was reportedly "written in the book of Enoch."¹¹

In addition, since 1830, the younger Smith had been working on a new "translation" of the King James Version of the Bible. By June 1835, he had edited his revision of Genesis to adjust the ages of some of the Old Testament patriarchs who lived before Noah, and was preparing to "print the New Translation [of the Bible]."¹² In fact, on June 21, shortly before Chandler's arrival, Smith publicly "preached in Kirtland on the evangelical [i.e., patriarchal] order."¹³ Given Smith's interest in priesthood, patriarchs, and the translation of ancient texts, the arrival in Kirtland of Chandler's traveling exhibit of ancient Egyptian artifacts was fortuitous.

AN "EGYPTIAN ALPHABET"

Shortly after acquiring Chandler's mummies and ancient Egyptian writings, Smith embarked upon preparing an alphabet of the Egyptian characters to help him "translate" what he believed was the Abraham papyrus. The so-called manuscript "Egyptian Alphabet" (which also represents a type of grammar) was used by Joseph Smith's scribes to record his translation and interpretation of Egyptian characters and other symbols. Only thirty-four pages of Smith's "Egyptian Alphabet" Ms. 1 have writing on them. The majority of the handwritten pages were recorded in July 1835. The original manuscript book is preserved today in the LDS Church History Library. It may be printed by the Church Historian's Press as part of the Joseph Smith Papers Project.¹⁴

Smith worked closely with Oliver Cowdery (1806-50) and William W. Phelps on this Alphabet. Smith regularly used scribes to help him write important records. These include the Book of Mormon; his revelations; his revision of the Bible; the "Book of Abraham;" many of his letters; and his personal journal. The "Manuscript History of the Church," also known as the "History of

¹⁰ H. Michael Marquardt, *Joseph Smith's 1828-1843 Revelations* (Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2013), 228; LDS D&C 107:40.

¹¹ Marquardt, *Joseph Smith's 1828-1843 Revelations*, 228-29; LDS D&C 107:39-57. Joseph Smith was said to recover, while revising Genesis, the lost prophetic book of Enoch mentioned in Jude 1:14. He now provided the line of patriarchal authority.

¹² Smith, Letter to "Dear brethren in the Lord," June 15, 1835, LDS Church History Library. See Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 363.

¹³ Manuscript History, Book B-1:595, LDS Church History Library; Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Period 1*, Brigham H. Roberts, ed., revised and enlarged, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 2:234, hereafter *History of the Church*.

¹⁴ The 34 inscribed pages are numbered 1–34. There are 188 blank pages interspersed among the inscribed pages. Blocks of text start on pages 1, 8, 12, 15, 19, 23, 27, 29, 31, and 33. "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language," located at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/grammar-and-alphabet-of-the-egyptian-language-circa-july-circa-december-1835>

Joseph Smith” or *History of the Church*, contains the following two entries for the month of July 1835:

I [Joseph Smith], with W. W. Phelps and O. Cowdery, as scribes, commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics.¹⁵

The remainder of this month, I [Joseph Smith] was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients.¹⁶

The surviving manuscripts of this Alphabet contain Egyptian characters copied by Smith, Cowdery, Phelps, and later in November 1835 by a third scribe, Warren Parrish. Some of the characters were copied directly from the original papyrus—from the vignette (or illustration) of what Smith published in 1842 as Facsimile No. 1 of his "Book of Abraham" translation. Smith, Phelps, and Cowdery first worked together on manuscripts 3 to 5. Phelps then recorded Smith's interpretations for each degree on manuscript 1. Later, Parrish briefly wrote in the manuscript 1 for Smith. While Smith's Alphabet does not provide accurate English translations of the Egyptian characters, it does offer insight into the way Smith approached the papyri prior to dictating the "Book of Abraham" text.¹⁷

The "Book of Abraham" contains ideas and wording that clearly depend upon material found in "Egyptian Alphabet" Ms. 1. This is especially evident where there is new information regarding Abraham. Included in the Alphabet are some Egyptian-like characters nowhere found on the papyri. The English explanations in the "Book of Abraham" are found in its fullest context in the Alphabet's 5th Degree. For example, in Abraham chapter 1, the name "Abraham" comes from a character in the Alphabet having the sound "Ah broam" or "Ah brah-oam."

The essay tells about the place the "Book of Abraham" has in Latter-day Saint thought. An example is the pre-earth life before being physically born and the creation of the earth from preexisting matter.

¹⁵ Manuscript History, Book B-1:596; *History of the Church*, 2:236. In January 1843, Smith "gave some instructions about Phelps & [Willard] Richards uniting in writing the history of the church" (Joseph Smith, Journal, January 20, 1843, LDS Church History Library). These scribes wrote in Smith's name and with his authorization. The information was based upon Phelps's recollection as he was in Kirtland at the time working with Smith. The two entries for July 1835 were written in September 1843.

¹⁶ Manuscript History, Book B-1:597; *History of the Church*, 2:238.

¹⁷ I retain the numbering of the manuscripts as found in Hugh Nibley, "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," *BYU Studies* 11 (Summer 1971):351. The original manuscripts are in LDS Church History Library. For a fuller treatment to the Joseph Smith papyri see H. Michael Marquardt. "Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papers: A History," in Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2011), 11-56; paperback edition (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 11-68.

TEACHING ON CREATION GODS

In Nauvoo, Illinois, on May 4-5, 1842, Smith introduced the temple endowment ceremony to the founding members of his Quorum of the Anointed.¹⁸ Smith's new ceremony included an account of the council of the creation gods. The next month, June 1842, Smith told Rev. George Moore: "We believe in three Gods, equal in power and glory. There are three persons in heaven, but those three are not one."¹⁹ When the LDS endowment was later fully administered in the Nauvoo Temple, the names of the three gods involved in the planning and organization of the Earth were identified as Eloheem [Elohim], Jehovah, and Michael.²⁰

When revising the Bible in June 1830, Smith had reported that God (singular) was the Creator.²¹ While the teaching of one god is found in the Book of Mormon (1829-30), by the time Smith worked on the last chapters of the "Book of Abraham" twelve years later in early March 1842, he had come to accept polytheism.²² There are forty-eight references to the plurality of gods in Abraham chapters 4-5. (Again, bold type signals Smith's additions to the Genesis account.)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

In the "Book of Abraham" the idea of plural gods (polytheism), a belief in many creation gods, has been added to the creation account.

And then the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth. (Abraham 4:1)

The beginning part of the LDS endowment outlines a belief in three creation gods. Those present are told about the commands and reports of the creation of the earth.

"BOOK OF ABRAHAM" PAPYRUS FRAGMENTS AFTER 1844

After Smith's death on June 27, 1844, his younger brother William (1811-93) and mother, Lucy (1775-1856), continued periodically to display the Egyptian records and mummies to visitors. In August 1851, newly appointed Church Apostle Franklin D. Richards (1821-99) published a small pamphlet in England entitled *The Pearl of Great Price*, which featured the text of Smith's "Book of Abraham" and the three facsimiles, which had been re-engraved. Some five years later, Théodule Devéria (1831-72), a young artist, photographer, and student of Egyptology working in the Louvre Museum (Paris, France), examined the "Book of Abraham" facsimiles. In commenting on Facsimile

¹⁸ *History of the Church* 5:1-3.

¹⁹ George Moore, Journal, entry for June 3, 1842, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. See also "A Visit to Joe Smith," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 22 (September 15, 1842):926.

²⁰ See Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, eds., *The Nauvoo Endowment Companies, 1845-1846: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005), 5, 21, 23n20.

²¹ Old Testament Manuscript 1, 3, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri; see Moses 2:1.

²² For essays on the LDS concept of God, see Gary James Bergera, ed., *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990).

No. 3, Fig. 5, he wrote: "The deceased led by Ma into the presence of Osiris. His name is Horus, as may be seen in the prayer which is at the bottom of the picture, and which is addressed to the divinities of the four cardinal points."²³ Devéria was thus the first to observe that what Joseph Smith had published as a "Facsimile from the Book of Abraham" was actually an ancient funeral illustration for a deceased Egyptian man named Horus (Hôr).

Less than two weeks after Lucy Smith's death in May 1856, her son Joseph's Egyptian papyri and mummies were purchased by a man named Abel Combs (1823-92). The bill of sale gave a brief history of the artifacts including: "From translations by Mr. [Joseph] Smith of the records, these [four] mummies were found to be in the family of Pharo [Pharaoh], king of Egypt." The bill was signed by Lewis C. Bidamon (1806-91), his wife and Joseph Smith's widow Emma Hale Smith Bidamon (1804-79), and her eldest son Joseph Smith III (1832-1914).²⁴

Combs subsequently sold two of Smith's mummies and some of the papyri to Edward Wyman's St. Louis Museum (in Missouri) and kept the others. When the museum placed some of the items on display in 1856, Gustaf Seyffarth, a visiting professor at the Concordia Seminary in St. Louis County, who had studied Egyptian, also read the name of the person for whom Facsimile No. 3 had been made: "the papyrus roll is not a record, but an invocation to the Deity Osiris, in which occurs the name of the person, (Horus,) and a picture of the attendant spirits, introducing the dead to the Judge, Osiris."²⁵

The mummies and papyri were eventually resold to Joseph H. Wood, owner of the popular Col. Wood's Museum in Chicago (the museum changed its name a number of times). They were on exhibit and were probably destroyed in the Chicago Fire in October 1871.²⁶ This is the last known location of the two mummies and artifacts. Also after Lewis Bidamon's death in 1891, his son Charles Edwin Bidamon retained in his possession ten pages of "Book of Abraham" Translation Manuscript 1. This manuscript, together with other historical items, was later sold by Bidamon to LDS collector Wilford C. Wood in July 1937. Wood afterwards donated the pages to the LDS Church.²⁷

In 1873, Thomas B. H. Stenhouse (1825-82), a dissident Mormon, published his book *The Rocky Mountain Saints: A Full and Complete History of the Mormons*, which reprinted Devéria's comments on the "Book of Abraham" facsimiles. Stenhouse's book was republished at least four times by 1905.²⁸ These republications circulated more widely Devéria's observation that some of the

²³ First published in French in Jules Remy, *Voyage au Pays des Mormons*, 2 vols. (Paris: E. Dentu, 1860), and in English translation in Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City* (London: W. Jeffs, 1861), 2:546.

²⁴ The bill of sale is dated May 26, 1856, LDS Church History Library. The bill was printed in "The Mormon Prophet's Mummies," *Daily Missouri Democrat*, June 12, 1857, St. Louis, Missouri.

²⁵ As cited in *Catalogue of the St. Louis Museum* (1859), 45, in Jay M. Todd, *The Saga of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1969), 298. See also Stanley B. Kimball, "New Light on Old Egyptiana: Mormon Mummies, 1848-71," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (Winter 1983):73-74.

²⁶ See Kimball, *Ibid.*, 77-82.

²⁷ Todd, *Saga of the Book of Abraham*, 326-31.

²⁸ T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints: A Full and Complete History of the Mormons* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873), 513-19. Republished in 1874 (London), 1878 (London), 1900 (New York), and 1904 (Salt Lake City).

"Book of Abraham" material was funerary in nature and that Facsimile No. 3, in particular, had originally been made for an Egyptian named Horus.

The second edition of the *Pearl of Great Price*, as edited by LDS Apostle Orson Pratt (1811-81), was issued in 1878. It was here that the words "purporting to be" were removed from the heading description of the "Book of Abraham," thereby cementing the assertion that Abraham himself wrote the "Book of Abraham." George Reynolds (1842-1909), another LDS Church official, the next year published a defense of the "Book of Abraham" as a divine and ancient record.²⁹ Then, on October 10, 1880, the *Pearl of Great Price*, including the text of the "Book of Abraham," was publicly canonized by LDS Church members as official scripture together with the Holy Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants.³⁰ Later, in a new edition, the *Pearl of Great Price* was again publicly voted upon as official scripture on October 6, 1902.³¹ Until 1981, the LDS Church printed the text of the 1902 edition of the "Book of Abraham," which relied on re-engraved copies of the facsimiles first published by Franklin Richards in 1851. Beginning in 1981, the Church returned to printing all three facsimiles as originally engraved by Reuben Hedlock (1809-69) in 1842.

In 1912, Rev. Franklin S. Spalding (1865-1914), Episcopalian Bishop to Utah, released his own independent study of the "Book of Abraham." Spalding's work printed letters from eight prominent Egyptologists, Orientalists, linguists, and historians who had responded to his inquiry regarding Joseph Smith's interpretations of the three facsimiles.³² (The published facsimiles provided at the time the only means for evaluating the accuracy of Smith's "translations.") All eight scholars independently reported that the facsimiles were ancient Egyptian funerary illustrations and bore no relationship to the English text of Smith's "translation."

In the intervening years, a few rebuttal articles appeared in LDS Church periodicals dealing with Spalding's book, and attempting to establish an ancient origin for the "Book of Abraham." Except for a handful of articles or books mentioning the controversy, nothing of importance occurred again until the 1960s.

As it turned out, Abel Combs retained in his possession the bill of sale and some of the papyri he had purchased from Lucy Smith's estate in 1856. After his death in 1892, these items passed to his nurse Charlotte Benecke Weaver. The papyri and bill of sale eventually ended up in the possession of Weaver's daughter Alice Combs Weaver Heusser, who approached the

²⁹ See George Reynolds, *The Book of Abraham. Its Authenticity Established as a Divine and Ancient Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News and Publishing Establishment, 1879). This forty-nine-page booklet had previously appeared serially in the *Deseret Evening News*, Salt Lake City, December 1878-March 1879.

³⁰ See *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 42 (November 15, 1880):724. Six years later, Devéria's examination was republished in W. Wyl [pseud. Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits or the Truth about Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Co., 1886), 221-23.

³¹ This edition was prepared by James E. Talmage (1862-1933) and contains chapters and verses to the text of the "Book of Abraham."

³² Franklin S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., As a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Arrow Press, 1912); Roger R. Keller, "Episcopalian Bishop Franklin S. Spalding and the Mormons," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 69 (Summer 2001):244-45. While Spalding was aware of *The Rocky Mountain Saints and Journey to Great Salt Lake City*, he solicited his own independent evaluations.

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City about selling them in 1918. At the time, the museum was not interested in acquiring the materials. Almost three decades later, however, the museum revisited its decision and purchased the papyri artifacts in 1947 from Edward Heusser, Alice's widower.³³ The fate of the two remaining Chandler mummies is unknown, though Combs probably sold them to another museum or private individual.³⁴

By the mid-1960s, the Metropolitan Museum of Art had decided to raise funds by selling some of its less unique holdings. Coincidentally, Aziz S. Atiya, a Coptic studies scholar at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, was shown the papyri while researching some of the museum's collections in 1966.³⁵ Though not a member of the LDS Church, Atiya knew of the papyri's importance to Mormons and soon was in touch with N. Eldon Tanner of the Church's First Presidency. Negotiations with the museum began a few weeks later. Eventually, an anonymous patron agreed to make a donation to the museum to cover the cost of the transfer, thereby facilitating the museum's "gift" of the items to the LDS Church on November 27, 1967.³⁶

The museum's transfer included eleven pieces, or fragments, of papyri, once belonging to three separate papyri—including the original of Facsimile No. 1. These fragments have since been, numbered as JSP (Joseph Smith Papyri) I-VIII, X-XI.³⁷ These eleven fragments joined a twelfth fragment of pieced-together papyri long-held by the LDS Church and known as the "Church Historian's Fragment" (now JSP IX, originally part of Ta-sherit-Min's "Book of the Dead"). The LDS Church subsequently published photographs of all of these the papyri in the February 1968 issue of its official *Improvement Era* magazine.

The papyrus characters included in the three English translation manuscripts and used to fill in missing areas in Facsimile No. 2 come from Joseph Smith Papyri (JSP) XI. This papyrus roll included the original (JSP I) of Facsimile No. 1 and ended with what is now Facsimile No. 3. It is known as the "Book of Breathings Made by Isis" and Papyrus of Hôr (also Horus, Horos). It is the oldest dated Book of Breathings composed circa 150 B.C.E.³⁸ Prior the time of Christ this Egyptian priest died. He had the common name of Horus. The papyrus scroll prepared for him concerns itself with the afterlife of the Egyptian priest Hôr, who was the son of his father Osorwer (also Osoroeris), who also was a priest and was deceased.

³³ H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1995), 242-47.

³⁴ Stanley Kimball concluded in 1983: "If they indeed exist, they are probably in storage, unknown, unidentified, and forgotten. Would the papyri be with them? Probably not" (Kimball, "New Light on Old Egyptiana: Mormon Mummies," 90).

³⁵ Also in April 1966, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, critics of the LDS Church, published a photographic reproduction (based on a microfilm copy) and a transcription of Joseph Smith's various Egyptian alphabet manuscripts: *Joseph Smith's Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1966).

³⁶ "An Interview with Dr. [Henry G.] Fischer," conducted by Norman Tolks, Lynn Travers, George D. Smith Jr., and F. Charles Graves, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2 (Winter 1967):64.

³⁷ Hugh W. Nibley numbered the papyri in *Improvement Era* 71 (February 1968):40, 40-A to 40-I.

³⁸ For the dating of JSP I, X, and XI, see Marc Coenen, "The Ownership and Dating of Certain Joseph Smith Papyri," in Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition* (2011 edition), 57-71; (2013 edition), 69-87.

Joseph Smith used the first and last illustration from the Papyrus of Hôr to provide a visual image relating to the story of Abraham. A number of Egyptian characters from this same papyrus were used together with “restored” characters to fill in pieces of the papyrus that had broken off and were missing from the first lines. Smith was intrigued by the topic that Abraham taught astronomy to the Egyptians that he gave instructions to have the damaged round disk (hypocephalus) filled in with characters from the Hôr papyrus.

As Egyptian studies progressed it became clearer that Joseph Smith had an important collection of papyri. Scholarly translations by Egyptologists John A. Wilson and Klaus Baer of some of the papyri followed in the independent LDS periodical *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in its summer and autumn 1968 issues.³⁹ Their translations again confirmed the status of the papyri as Egyptian funerary materials. Later translations by LDS and non-LDS scholars indicate that all of the recovered papyri are Egyptian funerary writings.

The latest book in this regard is the work of Robert K. Ritner, Professor of Egyptology in the Oriental Institute, at the University of Chicago. He cites the studies of non-LDS Egyptologists John A. Wilson, Richard A. Parker, and Klaus Baer, together with the works of LDS scholars who worked on deciphering the papyri under discussion which includes Hugh W. Nibley, Michael D. Rhodes and John Gee. Ritner provides a critical work on the following Egyptian texts: the Breathing Permit of Hôr, Book of the Dead of Ta-sherit-Min, Book of the Dead (chapter 125) of Nefer-ir-nebu, Book of Amenhotep and the Hypocephalus of Sheshonq.⁴⁰

The conclusion of all scholarly studies of the Joseph Smith Egyptian Papers—beginning in 1859-60 and continuing to the present—is that Smith, like other Americans of his time, had no knowledge or understanding of ancient Egyptian language(s). Before the Egyptian papyri were relocated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Latter-day Saints believed that Smith could accurately translate Egyptian and that it was written by Abraham.

Since 1967, most analyses of the "Book of Abraham" by LDS Church members, including the recent essay, no longer argue for the work as a literal translation of an ancient text. The papyrus that contains the Egyptian characters appearing on the three Translation Manuscripts and the “Egyptian” alphabet/grammar, worked on at Kirtland, Ohio, is today preserved by the LDS Church.

As the essay explains, and the LDS Church acknowledges for the first time: “Neither the rules nor the translations in the grammar book correspond to those recognized by Egyptologists today. None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mentioned Abraham’s name or any of the events recorded in the book of Abraham. Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the book of Abraham.”⁴¹ This statement is not a religious issue and was not made to question a member’s faith commitment to scripture but one of what does the Egyptian writing say.

³⁹ See for example later translations, by Robert K. Ritner, "The `Breathing Permit of Hôr' among the Joseph Smith Papyri," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 62 (2003):161-80; and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, Brigham Young University, 2002).

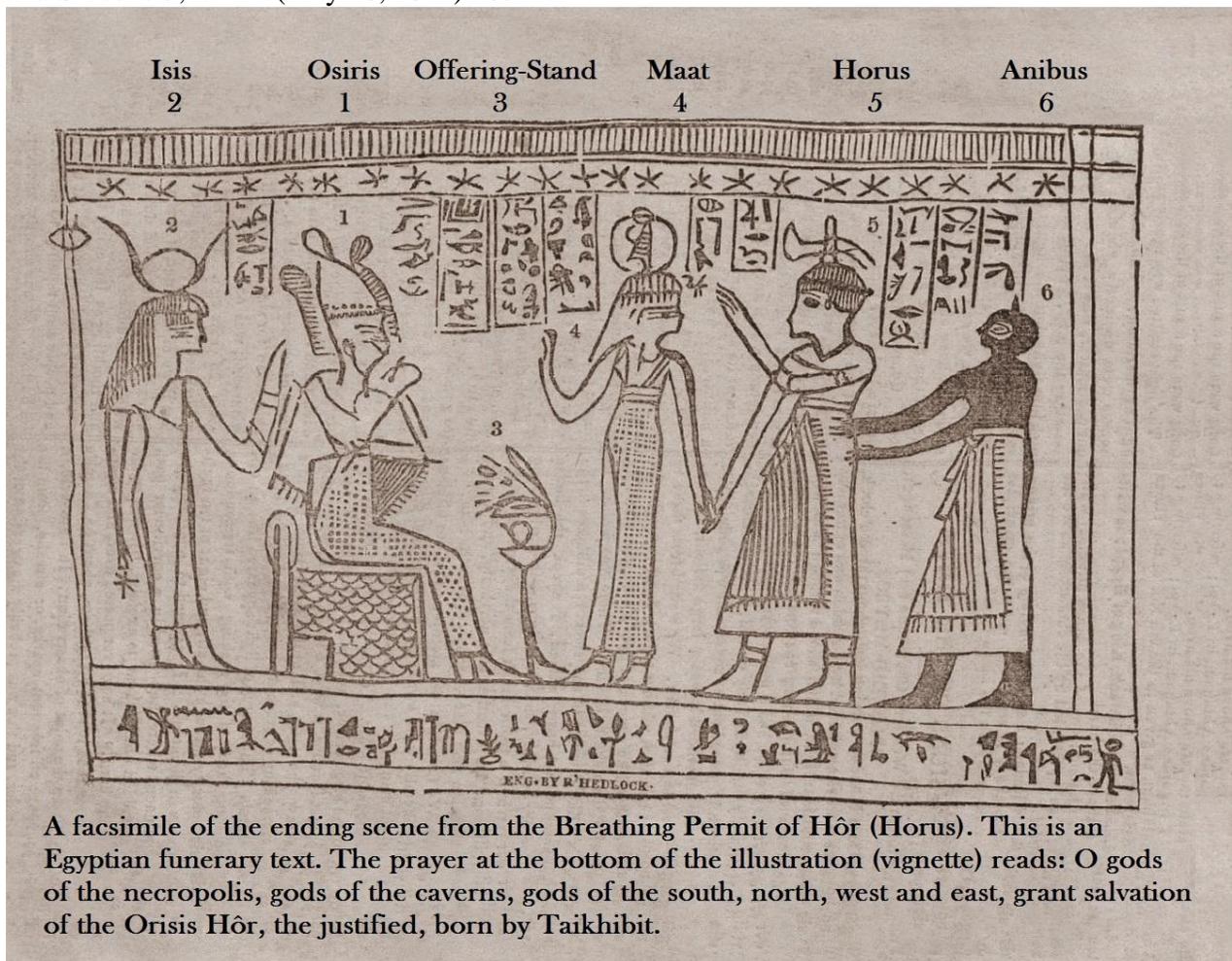
⁴⁰ Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2011); paperback edition (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013).

⁴¹ “Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham,” posted on www.lds.org, (under Gospel Topics), July 8, 2014.

This is an important statement that summarizes the reason why what was once regarded as an ancient Egyptian papyrus produced by Abraham is of modern composition. The writing of the “Book of Abraham” is interesting given the time period when it was produced, but from all indications it is not a record of Abraham.

Some other faith communities originating with Joseph Smith, such as the Community of Christ (formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), approach the “Book of Abraham” as a work of theological speculation and do not include it in their own scriptural canon.⁴² Also smaller restoration churches of Christ do not include the book of Abraham in their scriptures.

An example that confirms what Egyptologists and the LDS Church have maintained (no name or story about Abraham), is Facsimile No. 3. It is represented to be “from the Book of Abraham” but his name does not appear there. This illustration below was published in the *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 14 (May 16, 1842):783.



⁴² See Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1995), 192-210; Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820-1844* (Independence, Missouri: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 261-62.

The reason why there is a difference between what Smith explained and an actual translation of the characters on Facsimile No. 3 is because Joseph Smith could not correctly interpret the ancient Egyptian characters. In this example he said that the names of figures 2, 4, and 5: King Pharaoh, Prince of Pharaoh, and Shulem are represented in “the characters above his head,” “as written above the hand,” and “as represented by the characters above his hand.” Like many others of his time Smith did not know the Egyptian language by scholarly means or through inspiration.

While Joseph Smith may be "the first native-born American who is known to have made an effort to translate writings and to interpret vignettes found on ancient Egyptian funerary papyri," his translations, according to John A. Larson of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago in 1994, "can, at best, be described as unorthodox." Nevertheless, Larson continues, "the position of the Mormon prophet is secure within the early history of American speculation about ancient Egypt. As a manifestation of American interest in the culture of ancient Egypt, the story of Joseph Smith and his ancient Egyptian mummies and papyri is one of the more curious chapters in the early history of American Egyptology."⁴³

Egyptologist Lanny Bell, formerly of the University of Chicago and since of Brown University, adds: “Smith's approach to the translation of ancient Egyptian documents ranks him squarely in the tradition of the esoteric interpretation of hieroglyphics...[Given the] disagreement[s], even rancor, over the decipherment of hieroglyphics persisting among Egyptologists until well after his death in 1844, we should hardly expect Joseph Smith to have been able to familiarize himself with Champollion's work, properly assess its validity, and possibly incorporate it into his own translation of the papyrus he had before him.”⁴⁴

I wrote concerning the Egyptian papyrus Joseph Smith used: “Instead of this scroll being the writings of Abraham, the papyrus has no connection with Abraham or his time. In producing the text of the Book of Abraham parts of Genesis were copied and revised to make it appear authentic. Joseph Smith was human, however considering his claim to correctly translate Egyptian into the English of the Book of Abraham we find that it offers no more than a pretended translation from the Egyptian.”⁴⁵

⁴³ John A. Larson, "Joseph Smith and Egyptology: An Early Episode in the History of American Speculation about Ancient Egypt, 1835-1844," in David P. Silverman, ed., *For His Ka: Essays Offered in Memory of Klaus Baer* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1994), 160.

⁴⁴ Lanny Bell, "The Ancient Egyptian 'Books of Breathing,' the Mormon 'Book of Abraham,' and the Development of Egyptology in America," in Stephen E. Thompson and Peter Der Manuelian, eds., *Egypt and Beyond: Essays Presented to Leonard H. Lesko upon His Retirement from the Wilbour Chair of Egyptology at Brown University, June 2005* (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, Department of Egyptology and Ancient Western Asian Studies, 2008), 30, 33.

⁴⁵ H. Michael Marquardt, comp., *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papers* (Cullman, Alabama: Printing Service, 1981), 191. Reprinted in 2009 by Utah Lighthouse Ministry in Salt Lake City.