



CHAPTER 17

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the text of the Book of Abraham on the Joseph Smith Papyri?

No. The Book of Abraham is not on the surviving fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri.

Doesn't the Church claim that it is?

No. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no official position on which papyri Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham from. They do have an official position that the Book of Abraham is “a translation of some ancient records that have fallen into [Joseph Smith’s] hands from the catacombs of Egypt.” This translation contained “the writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt.” The question of which ancient records Joseph Smith did not publically specify, and the Church has not specified the matter any further.

But don't most members of the Church believe that it is?

A few do, but most do not. The issue is of little importance to most members of the Church.

Didn't Joseph Smith think that the Book of Breathings was the Book of Abraham?

W. W. Phelps seems to have thought that the Book of Breathings was the Book of Abraham, but it is harder to tell what Joseph Smith thought. No clear evidence indicates that Joseph Smith thought the Book of Breathings was the Book of Abraham. The nineteenth-century eyewitnesses describe the Book of Abraham as being on a long roll. Only if Horos's scroll *is* the long roll would the Book of Abraham have come from that papyrus—in which case the scroll would have been long enough to contain the entire book. Some of the eyewitness accounts describe the source of the Book of Abraham as being a roll that could not possibly be the Horos scroll because it was intact at a time when the Horos scroll had already been cut up and mounted.

How did Joseph Smith translate the Book of Abraham?

The exact process is not known. The only direct statement is that it was done by direct inspiration from heaven. Although some nineteenth-century accounts claim that Joseph Smith used the Urim and Thummim to translate the Book of Abraham, those individuals were not actually involved in the translation and were not in a position to know. He definitely did not translate it using grammars or dictionaries or using the method of Champollion.

Wouldn't Joseph Smith have thought that the Book of Abraham was on the papyri he had?

If he did not write it down, it is hard to know what Joseph Smith might have thought. We need to remember that the papyri that Joseph Smith had are not the same as the papyri we have. Joseph Smith had at least four papyrus documents; we only have fragments of two of them. Furthermore, Joseph Smith's descriptions of the papyri are some of the vaguest of those from the nineteenth century.

He had the texts and was showing them to people, so there was little need for him to describe what he could demonstrate. Thus, we are comparing vague statements with an incomplete set of documents, and as a result, it is hard to tell when or whether they line up.

Aren't there documents that show that Joseph Smith thought that the Book of Abraham was the Book of Breathings?

There are documents that seem to have belonged to W. W. Phelps and are in his handwriting, with additions by Warren Parrish. The documents use some characters from the Document of Breathings Made by Isis; other characters sometimes match up with portions of the Book of Abraham and sometimes with things that seem to have nothing to do with the Book of Abraham. These have been attributed to Joseph Smith by many individuals, but the attribution to Joseph Smith depends more on assumption and assertion than on demonstration; they cannot be proven to be Joseph Smith's. It is assumed that since Joseph Smith sometimes used W. W. Phelps as a scribe, those particular documents must be Joseph Smith's thoughts. Those who make that assumption forget that W. W. Phelps was a very independent-minded man who did many things on his own, not always with Joseph Smith's approval. We know that W. W. Phelps had initiated a similar project on his own before the papyri ever appeared on the scene and that some of that work appears in the documents, which use the same format as Phelps previously used. In short, it is not clear from the documents themselves what is going on. Those who deal with the documents make a number of assumptions about them and generally assume their own conclusions rather than demonstrate them.

Don't the facsimiles come from the Joseph Smith Papyri?

Yes, they do. But only one of the originals has survived.

Doesn't the fact that the facsimiles were next to text in the Joseph Smith Papyri mean that the text next to it should be the Book of Abraham?

Not necessarily. The facsimiles were originally published on a 1:1 scale. Furthermore, they were available for public inspection in Nauvoo. It is thus readily apparent that Facsimiles 1 and 3 come from a different papyrus than the much larger Facsimile 2. At least one of the facsimiles, and perhaps all three, had to have come from a different papyrus than the text of the Book of Abraham, and it is hard to see how Joseph Smith would not have known this. There is no reason to expect that Joseph Smith thought that the Book of Abraham had to come from the text next to it.

Don't the pictures usually accompany the text in Egyptian manuscripts?

They often do, but this is not universally the case. There is a general correlation between pictures and text in Egyptian manuscripts, and there is usually an identifiable connection between the text and the picture. Observing those correlations and connections allows us to say that, in some Egyptian manuscripts, the picture has been put in the wrong place.

Sometimes the mismatch of text to picture can be explained by the way that the manuscript was made. Different Egyptian manuscripts were made in different ways (and this is especially apparent with incomplete manuscripts). Sometimes the pictures were put in first and the text was added later; sometimes the text was put in first and the pictures were added later. In some cases, the pictures were added in at the same time as the text. So if the pictures and the text were written by different scribes, or a scribe was not paying attention, the wrong text could be placed next to the picture or vice versa. This is harder to use as an explanation if the pictures were added at the same time as the text.

Sometimes the picture does not match and there is no good explanation for why that is. In some cases, it is thought that certain pictures are so commonly associated with particular texts that when the picture appears without its text, perhaps the picture is placed in the papyrus as a representation of the entire text. For example, P. Louvre N 3284 has a Document of Breathings Made by Isis followed by the picture for Book of the Dead 162, without the text. On the other hand, P. Louvre N 3083 has the Document of Breathings Made by Isis followed by the text of Book of the Dead 162, without the picture. We infer from these two manuscripts that there may have been some ancient Egyptian association of the two texts and that the picture may stand in for the text, but we have no ancient Egyptian text that tells us that such was the case.

Looking at the Joseph Smith Papyri, we find that Horos, who owned Joseph Smith Papyri I, XI, and X, also owned a Book of the Dead (P. Louvre N 3207 + 3208 + 3209). In his copy of the Book of the Dead (which is written by the same scribe and illustrated by the same artist), more than half of the pictures do not match up with the proper texts. Furthermore, in examining papyri owned by members of his family, we can see that mismatching pictures with texts is common with all his descendants. So although Joseph Smith Papyrus I was immediately next to the text of the Document of Breathings Made by Isis on Joseph Smith Papyri XI and X, no other manuscripts of the Document of Breathings Made by Isis contains an illustration remotely resembling Joseph Smith Papyrus I, and there is no reference in the Document of Breathings Made by Isis to anything like what is depicted in Joseph Smith Papyrus I. We therefore conclude that in this case the picture and the text are not related.

What is the date of the Joseph Smith Papyri?

Over the years, Egyptologists have dated the Joseph Smith Papyri to various time periods from the second century BC to the second century AD. In the 1960s, Egyptologists favored the second century AD. Beginning in the 1980s, the Belgian Egyptologist Jan Quaegebeur challenged that date, and over time a number of Egyptologists have championed an earlier date of the second century BC for Joseph Smith Papyri I+XI+X. The newer date is based on the genealogical information about the owners and the writing instrument used. A couple of Egyptologists still prefer the second-century-AD date. Joseph Smith Papyri II–IX can currently be dated no more accurately than either third or second century BC.

Why do the Joseph Smith Papyri date so much later than Abraham?

Typically, the manuscripts of ancient narratives were copied later than the works themselves. For example, the earliest manuscripts of books of the Bible date many centuries after the books were written. Joseph Smith Papyri II–IX contain portions of the Book of the Dead, which portions were originally written hundreds of years earlier. Some of the portions of the Book of the Dead were texts written before Abraham was born, and yet they are still preserved in manuscripts even later than the Joseph Smith Papyri.

Why are there no other manuscripts of the Book of Abraham?

While some texts are known from many manuscripts, many important texts are known from only one manuscript. For example, the Middle Kingdom text, *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, is preserved in only one manuscript.

Shouldn't there be some indication that there was a Book of Abraham?

There are a number of ancient stories about Abraham that contain points similar to the Book of Abraham. Many of these are retellings of each other. The story changed over time, but some of them repeat parts of their source material word for word.

Could Joseph Smith have simply taken the Book of Abraham from these accounts?

The problem with that theory is that most of them were not available to Joseph Smith. They were in other languages or were not published until after his death. Those accounts available to Joseph Smith also contained details that differed from the Book of Abraham, and yet somehow Joseph Smith did not borrow those details. For example, while many of the accounts have Abraham saved from the fire in Ur, most of those accounts have God himself saving Abraham, and only a few accounts, not available in English until after Joseph Smith's death, have Abraham saved by an angel—as it is in the Book of Abraham. If Joseph Smith were to borrow one of the accounts available to him, we would expect him to borrow the details as well.

Why is there no archaeological evidence for Abraham?

We do not have archaeological evidence for most ancient individuals. We have specific archaeological evidence for comparatively few. On most archaeological sites, archaeologists can only dig a small fraction of the available site. An archaeologist might dig up one house but not its neighbor. Unless the archaeologists happen to dig up the specific dwelling of a specific ancient individual, there will be no evidence for that specific individual. Even if the archaeologist happens to dig up the house or grave of a specific individual, that individual may not have left any inscriptions to tell us who they were. Most ancient

graves, for example, do not have any inscriptions, so archaeologists have no idea what the names of the individuals excavated were.

What are the facsimiles?

There has been much disagreement about the nature of the facsimiles. Some have suggested that the facsimiles are illustrations from the Book of the Dead; if they are, they are rare illustrations, because they do not match most illustrations from the Book of the Dead. Others have suggested that the facsimiles are illustrations from the Document of Breathings Made by Isis. At least two of the facsimiles are not known to be illustrations of that text. It was popular in some quarters to suggest that Joseph Smith simply made up the facsimiles to look like ancient Egyptian figures, but this theory has mostly disappeared since the discovery of the Joseph Smith Papyri. Some have suggested that ancient Jews reinterpreted Egyptian illustrations to match with Jewish stories as happens in the Testament of Abraham, in which the Egyptian weighing-of-the-heart scene is given a Jewish interpretation. Still others have suggested that the Book of Abraham was supposed to have contained illustrations, but the illustrations were actually left blank (as was the case with the Apis Embalming Ritual) and that Joseph Smith used other similar illustrations found on the papyri he had as a close substitute for the missing illustrations.

Whatever theory one adopts for the nature of the facsimiles, it has a big impact on how the facsimiles are interpreted and what counts as evidence for that interpretation. For example, if one assumes that the facsimiles are Egyptian illustrations as reinterpreted by ancient Jews, what the ancient Egyptians thought about them will matter very little; only Jewish evidence will be relevant and not ancient Egyptian evidence.

Why don't the interpretations of the facsimiles by Joseph Smith match the interpretations by Egyptologists?

There are four questions and an assumption implicit in this question. The first question: What is the ancient Egyptian interpretation of the facsimiles? The second: What is Joseph Smith's interpretation of the facsimiles? The third: How do Egyptologists interpret the facsimiles? The fourth: Do any of these interpretations match? The assumption is that the interpretation of modern Egyptologists is the same as the ancient Egyptian interpretation. This assumption is often false.

The process of interpreting the facsimiles actually begins by figuring out how we can determine what the ancient Egyptian interpretations of the facsimiles were. (And to complicate the issue even more, ancient Egyptians often interpreted a type of scene in more than one way.) At the time the Joseph Smith Papyri were written, very different figures were represented by the same iconography; a jackal-headed figure could represent Anubis,¹ Duamutef,² or Osiris,³ among others. Additionally, the same figure could be represented by different iconography. At the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri, the Egyptian god Anubis, for example, could be represented as a man, a lion-headed man, a jackal-headed man, a falcon-headed man, or a giant winged snake.⁴

1. Christian Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 1:391.

2. Christian Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 7:516.

3. P. Rhind I, in Georg Möller, *Die beiden Totenpapyrus Rhind des Museums zu Edinburg* (Lepizig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1913).

4. Christian Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 1:391.

Another problem we must be aware of is that the identification of a figure is not the same as understanding what it meant to the ancient Egyptians. Some people think that all that they have to do is match a name with a figure. But that is only the beginning of the task of interpreting. One must also explain the associations that come to an ancient Egyptian's mind with that particular name. Within that range of potential associations, do the interpretations of the facsimiles fit?

Why is the Book of Abraham important to the Church?

The Book of Abraham is the clearest explanation of the preexistence in Latter-day Saint scripture. It is cited for that more than for any other purpose. The preexistence as explained in the Book of Abraham has had a profound influence on how Latter-day Saints see themselves and the plan of salvation.

Does the Book of Abraham promote racism?

Some Latter-day Saints have used it in times past to promote racism, but a careful reading of the text shows that such interpretations are imposed upon the text and do not naturally come from it.