

9

JOSEPH SMITH AND THE KINDERHOOK PLATES

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IN THE SPRING OF 1843, A GROUP OF MEN DUG INTO AN INDIAN MOUND near Kinderhook, Illinois—about seventy-five miles downriver from Nauvoo. Several feet into the mound, they found human bones and a set of six brass plates covered with inscriptions. These “Kinderhook plates” were soon brought to Nauvoo. The official History of the Church records that Joseph Smith examined the plates and translated from them. Many years later, two of the men present when the plates were uncovered revealed that the plates had been a hoax. The leader of the excavation had made the plates with some help from the village blacksmith and planted them in the mound just prior to their discovery. In 1980, the one surviving plate was examined and determined to be a modern forgery. This finding has been used to impugn Joseph’s credibility as a prophet and translator of ancient scripture. The argument, however, ignores the historical context of Joseph Smith’s personal interest in languages. A close investigation of the episode indicates that his “translation” from the Kinderhook plates was an attempt at traditional translation. He had not attempted a translation with divine aid, as he had with the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham, and he did not lead others to believe he had. His incorrect translation of the Kinderhook plates was simply a mistake—something he had never thought himself above.

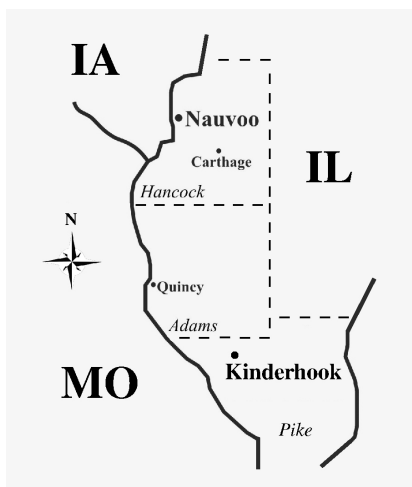
Robert Wiley, known as a “respectable merchant” in the small village of Kinderhook, Illinois, told others that he had dreamed three nights in a row that there was treasure buried in one of the nearby Indian mounds.¹ Wiley dug down several feet into a mound and uncovered “a flat rock that sounded

hollow beneath.”² On April 23, 1843, he gathered several others with him to remove the stone and see what lay beneath.³

When the stone was removed, the group found human bones and a set of six brass plates, each bell-shaped and nearly three inches in height. There was a hole near the top of each plate and a ring that connected them together—although the ring quickly broke and the plates were removed from it. The plates were covered with inscriptions—both illustrations and what appeared to be an ancient language.⁴ At the time of the discovery, there were two local Latter-day Saints among the crowd. Wilbur Fugate recounted that when the plates were discovered, one of the Latter-day Saints “leaped and shouted for joy.”⁵

It is not hard to guess why this Latter-day Saint jumped for joy. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the claims of Joseph Smith that an angel revealed to him the location of an ancient record, inscribed on plates of gold, and that God had given him power to translate the language on the plates, known as the Book of Mormon.⁶ The plates found near Kinderhook could be seen as providing evidence for the golden plates of the Book of Mormon.

The plates were soon brought to Nauvoo and shown to Joseph Smith by a man named Moore. This was apparently George Moore, a Unitarian minister based in Quincy, Illinois—located between Kinderhook and Nauvoo.⁷ Joseph Smith kept them at his house for a few days and attempted to translate a part of them. Under the date of May 1, 1843, the official *History of the Church* reads: “I [Joseph Smith] insert fac-similes of the six brass plates found near Kinderhook, in Pike county, Illinois, on April 23, by Mr. Robert Wiley and others, while excavating a large mound [the history includes images of the facsimiles]. . . . I have translated a portion of them, and find they contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the Ruler of heaven and earth.”⁸



Western Illinois. Courtesy of Brian Hales.

Apostles John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff, publishers of both the *Times and Seasons* (the Church newspaper) and the *Nauvoo Neighbor* (the



Two sides of the surviving Kinderhook plate. Courtesy of Chicago History Museum.

city newspaper), printed an article in both papers about the discovery of the plates.⁹ They also published a broadside with facsimiles of the twelve sides of the six Kinderhook plates. The broadside declared, “The contents of the Plates, together with a Fac-Simile of the same, will be published in the ‘Times and Seasons,’ as soon as the translation is completed.”¹⁰

During the pioneer period of Mormon history, Apostle Orson Pratt and other Latter-day Saint authors occasionally republished the facsimiles and information about the plates as evidence for the reality of the golden plates of the Book of Mormon. These members clearly believed the plates were authentic.¹¹

THE KINDERHOOK PLATES ARE FORGERIES

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, suspicions began to arise regarding the authenticity of the plates. In the 1870s, Wilbur Fugate, one of the men who unearthed the plates, wrote letters revealing that the plates were part of a hoax. He claimed that he, Robert Wiley, and the village blacksmith had made the plates, and he had planted them in the mound the night before their discovery. One of Fugate’s letters was published in an anti-Mormon book in 1886.¹² In 1912, the Illinois State Historical Society published an earlier letter written by W. P. Harris, also present when the plates were unearthed, confirming what Fugate had written. Harris’s 1855 letter said he had initially believed in the discovery but later discovered that it was a prank.¹³

For over a century now, critics of Mormonism have been publicizing this evidence—insisting that if the plates are fraudulent, then Joseph Smith

In one of Fugate's letters, he wrote, "I made the hieroglyphics by making impressions on beeswax and filling them with acid and putting it on the plates," a process of etching that had been developed in Europe in the Middle Ages. If the Kinderhook plates had been created in the Americas before European contact, they would most likely have been engraved with a stylus or some other sharp tool.

Five of the six plates have been lost, but one remaining plate is housed at the Chicago History Museum.¹⁷ In 1980, Mormon historian Stanley B. Kimball received permission to have this plate tested by D. Lynn Johnson, a professor of materials science and engineering at Northwestern University. Testing with a scanning electron microscope showed that the characters on the plates were etched with acid, not engraved, and testing with a scanning auger microscope found traces of etching acid in the character grooves. Destructive testing showed that the metal inside the plate was a fine alloy, consistent with nineteenth-century manufacturing techniques and unlike the crude alloys of ancient times. These results determined conclusively that the Kinderhook plates were of modern manufacture.¹⁸

Kimball also noted that the characters on the plates were not authentic. They bear little-to-no resemblance to any known language. In fact, they do not resemble language at all because they have almost none of the character repetition found in genuine script. When Wiley and Fugate etched the inscriptions, they apparently just made up the characters on the spot.¹⁹ So there actually is no way to translate anything from the plates.

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST A TRANSLATION

In the same article, Kimball argued that Joseph Smith never claimed to translate from the Kinderhook plates. In fact, he showed that Joseph Smith had not actually written that he translated the plates, as it seems he did in the official *History of the Church*. The mid-nineteenth-century Church historians who compiled "The History of Joseph Smith," later published as *The History of the Church*, had taken entries from Joseph Smith's journal, entries from other journals, and other documents and combined them into a continuous narrative that reads as if written by Joseph Smith. This kind of historical writing was common before the early twentieth century.²⁰ Stanley Kimball argued that the information on the Kinderhook plates in the *History of the Church* was unreliable because it was not taken from Joseph Smith's journal but rather from William Clayton's.²¹

William Clayton served as Joseph Smith's private secretary and in several clerical capacities in the Church and in Nauvoo's city government.²² While carrying out his duties, Clayton often worked closely with Joseph Smith. James B. Allen, a Mormon historian who wrote a biography of Clayton, explained that "beginning in early 1842, William Clayton found himself involved in nearly every important activity of Nauvoo, but especially the

private concerns of Joseph Smith. For two and a half years, until Joseph's death in 1844, they were in each other's company almost daily."²³ Over time, they became good friends. Because William Clayton was so close to Joseph Smith, his journal contains valuable information about the things the Prophet said and did. This is why the early Church historians felt comfortable utilizing entries from Clayton's journal.

On May 1, 1843, William Clayton traced the edges of one of the plates in his journal, and wrote about them:

I have seen 6 brass plates which were found . . . by some persons who were digging in a mound. They found a skeleton. . . . The plates were on the breast of the skeleton—This diagram shows the size of the plates being drawn on the edge of one of them. They are covered with ancient characters of language containing from 30 to 40 on each side of the plates. Prest J. has translated a portion and says they contain the history of the person with whom they were found & he was a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the ruler of heaven & earth.²⁴

On May 7, 1843, Apostle Parley P. Pratt wrote about the Kinderhook plates in a letter to one of his cousins. Pratt wrote:

Six plates having the appearance of Brass have lately been dug out of a mound by a gentleman in Pike Co. Illinois. they are small and filled with engravings in Egyptian language and contain the genealogy of one of the ancient Jaredites back to Ham the son of Noah[.] his bones were found in the same vase (made of cement) part of the bones had crumbled to dust & the other part were preserved[.] the bones were 15 feet underground. . . . A large number of Citizens here have seen them and compared the Characters with those on the Egyptian papyri which is now in this city.²⁵

Stanley Kimball questioned the reliability of Clayton's journal entry by pointing out its differences with this letter by Pratt.²⁶ Clayton and Pratt disagreed on a few points regarding the unearthing of the plates. But neither man had been present when the plates were unearthed—they were just reporting what they had heard. They were better positioned to know what Joseph Smith had said about the plates. Kimball wrote that "Clayton said that the plates gave a history of an Egyptian; Pratt mentioned a Jaredite."²⁷ Actually, Clayton never referred to the skeletal remains found with the plates as belonging to an Egyptian. Rather, he wrote the man was "a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt." Pratt wrote that the plates contained "the genealogy of one of the ancient Jaredites back to Ham

the son of Noah.” So Pratt actually concurred with Clayton that this person was a descendant of Ham, supporting the credibility of Clayton’s report.

Kimball also argued that we do not know for certain where Clayton got his information. When Clayton wrote that Joseph Smith had “translated a portion” of the plates, he did not write that he had seen Joseph Smith translating or state directly that Joseph Smith had said he translated. The journal entry’s text and tracing of one of the plates do show, however, that Clayton was with Joseph Smith in the Smith home, had access to the plates there, and had his journal with him.

Another assertion Kimball promoted was that Clayton may have been exaggerating—that what Clayton called the results of translation may have just been a speculative comment.²⁸ But nothing in the entry indicates speculation, and this would not have been typical of Clayton. Modern historians recognize Clayton as one of the most accurate and important Nauvoo sources on Joseph Smith. James B. Allen, Clayton’s biographer, wrote that Clayton “delighted in the specific and the concrete, which helps account for his success as a scribe and a clerk. . . . [A]s a diarist and historian he described what he saw around him, usually with skill and great descriptive power but seldom with any interpretive imagination.”²⁹ Church leaders trusted his reporting of Joseph Smith’s teachings enough to canonize Clayton’s report of some of these teachings, taken with little change from his journal entries, as what are now sections 130 and 131 of the Doctrine and Covenants.³⁰ Clayton’s entry about Joseph Smith’s statements and actions regarding the Kinderhook plates is likely accurate.

Kimball’s main argument that Joseph Smith did not translate is that “the expected translation did not appear.”³¹ But Clayton said Joseph Smith had translated only “a portion” of the Kinderhook plates. And a translation of or from the “portion” Smith worked on did “appear”—in Clayton’s journal. Although Joseph Smith himself did not write that he had translated from the Kinderhook plates, we still have to account for what Clayton wrote—which to all appearances is reliable. Consequently, as believing Latter-day Saints, we need to be able to explain how Joseph Smith could have translated from fraudulent plates.

Some may feel that we also need to account for Joseph Smith believing the plates were genuine. Although he was a prophet, he was a man who could make mistakes. Joseph Smith believed that the Holy Ghost could warn him of trouble and help him discern truth from falsehood,³² but he also admitted that he could be tricked by others. For example, he explained that when the Missouri state militia took him and others as prisoners in 1838 it was because George Hinkle, a fellow Latter-day Saint whom they trusted, had taken them to negotiate with the militia and, as Smith wrote, “decoyed us unawares.”³³ Because Joseph Smith never claimed that he could not be deceived, his mistaken belief that the Kinderhook plates

were genuine does not detract from his prophetic claims. Moreover, Joseph Smith's belief that the Kinderhook plates were genuine could be used to argue that he was a true prophet. It suggests that he believed in real buried records, as one would expect if he had found such a record himself. The only real problem for Latter-day Saints is how or why Joseph Smith *translated* from the Kinderhook plates.

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION

It should be noted that the problem of Joseph's translation of the Kinderhook plates is not in how much he translated but rather whether he translated at all. If Joseph Smith only translated a single character from the plates, we would still need to explain how this could be if there was nothing to translate.

Since 1981, when Stanley Kimball published his article on the Kinderhook plates, his evidence that the plates were forgeries has been uniformly accepted. Nearly all devout Latter-day Saints who have written about the plates have also accepted Kimball's argument that Joseph Smith did not translate from them. Latter-day Saints have been inclined to accept Kimball's argument that Joseph Smith did not translate the plates. They likely want to defend Joseph Smith as a true prophet, and they believe this means that he could not have translated anything from the fraudulent Kinderhook plates. Critics claim that since the plates were fake, Joseph Smith was a false prophet, and they have used this as evidence that he deceived others about having the gift of translation. What both these positions share in common is the assumption that Joseph Smith would have been acting as a prophet while translating from the Kinderhook plates.³⁴

The assumption is a natural one, given that Joseph Smith brought forth the Book of Mormon through a process he described as translation "by the gift and power of God."³⁵ It is reasonable to place the Kinderhook-plates episode in the same context as the Book of Mormon—that Joseph Smith was either translating or pretending to translate the Kinderhook plates by the power of God. The problem with this common assumption is that it ignores the evidence that Joseph Smith had a personal interest in languages, that he spent considerable time studying languages, that he engaged in traditional translation without claiming divine aid, and that he approached the Kinderhook plates in precisely this fashion.

JOSEPH SMITH AND TRANSLATION BY REVELATION

Joseph Smith's interest in language grew naturally out of his earlier prophetic projects. He had translated the Book of Mormon in 1828 and 1829.³⁶ According to the Book of Mormon, the golden plates had been written using "reformed Egyptian" characters to express the Hebrew language.³⁷

From the time he translated this passage forward, Joseph Smith may have seen a relationship between the Hebrew and Egyptian languages.

From 1830 to 1833, Joseph Smith and his scribes worked on a “new translation” of the Bible. Starting with the King James Version, they made several expansions and hundreds of revisions to the text, some by revelation and others, such as small grammatical changes, which may have been considered to be the result of human reason rather than revelation.³⁸ In the summer of 1835, Joseph Smith and others in Kirtland, Ohio, purchased four Egyptian mummies and a collection of papyri. Using the papyri, Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham by the divine gift of revelation.³⁹ He translated Abraham 1:1–2:18 in Kirtland; then he resumed his translation several years later in Nauvoo. His journal reports that he was “translating” the Book of Abraham and then “translating and revising” on March 8–9, 1842—about one year before he translated from the Kinderhook plates. Some of the explanations of the illustrations that accompanied the published Book of Abraham used Hebrew words—again linking Hebrew and Egyptian.⁴⁰

JOSEPH SMITH AND TRADITIONAL TRANSLATION

Joseph Smith’s translation work with the Egyptian papyri in 1835 heightened his more traditional interest in ancient languages. In addition to the Egyptian papyri themselves and the Book of Abraham translation manuscripts, there are several other manuscripts from this period that are clearly related to both. These documents, commonly called the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” are in the handwriting of Joseph Smith and others who were helping him at the time. One of these documents is a bound volume titled “Grammar & Alphabet of the Egyptian Language,” with a spine labeled “Egyptian Alphabet.” The “Egyptian Alphabet” is really more of a lexicon—a sort of dual-language dictionary with Egyptian characters and corresponding definitions or interpretations in English.⁴¹

It is uncertain why or how these documents were made, but many of the character interpretations are clearly related to content in the Book of Abraham. Because of this, some people view the documents as the translation key for Egyptian by which Joseph Smith produced the English text of the Book of Abraham. Critics of Mormonism especially favor this hypothesis because the English interpretations of the Egyptian characters do not match the definitions given by Egyptologists.⁴² Another hypothesis is that Joseph Smith first received the Book of Abraham by revelation and then tried to figure out how to translate Egyptian by matching papyri characters to the Book of Abraham text. Before Joseph Smith acquired the papyri, scholars in New York and Philadelphia had tried to translate them but could not.⁴³ Champollion, the French linguist, was just beginning to figure out how to translate Egyptian using the Rosetta Stone. Perhaps Joseph Smith



“Egyptian Alphabet.” Courtesy of Church History Library.

was attempting the same process, using the revealed Book of Abraham and the papyri as his “Rosetta Stone.”⁴⁴

A problem for either theory is that despite the overlapping content, neither document could have been wholly derived from the other. The “Egyptian Alphabet” contains much that is not in the Book of Abraham, and thus could not have been entirely derived from it. Additionally, the Book of Abraham contains a great deal that is not in the “Egyptian Alphabet” and thus could not have been translated by solely using it. Another possibility is that Joseph Smith received initial impressions of some concepts in the Book of Abraham as he and his scribes attempted to figure out the papyri for themselves. These concepts, along with the group’s larger intellectual effort, were recorded in the “Egyptian Alphabet.” Such a process could account for why the “Egyptian Alphabet” and translated Book of Abraham share some content even though neither could have been simply derived from the other. These enigmatic documents remain a subject of great controversy in Mormon history.

Joseph Smith began a serious study of biblical languages in late 1835. His journal notes that he began his studies with “a Hebrew bible, lexicon & Grammar, also a Greek Lexicon and Webster’s English Lexicon.”⁴⁵ He and others soon began an intensive Hebrew class with a Jewish instructor, meeting almost daily for the next eight weeks.⁴⁶ The students read from the Old Testament in Hebrew and practiced translating. Joseph wrote enthusiastically of these studies, recording in his journal: “I attended the school and read and translated with my class as usual, and my soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original, and I am determined to pursue the study of languages until I shall become master of them, if I am permitted to live long enough, at any rate so long as I do live I am determined to make

1

10. character

Grammar & Alphabet of the Egyptian Language

This is called *Za Ir on high*, or *Shal dicton high*.
 This character is in the fifth degree, independ-
 ent and arbitrary. It may be proceed in the
 fifth degree while it stands independent and arbi-
 trary: that is, without a straight mark inserted
 above or below it. By inserting a straight mark
 over it thus (1) it increases its signification five
 degrees: by inserting two straight lines, thus (2) its signi-
 fication is increased five times more. By inserting
 three straight lines thus (3) its signification is again
 increased five times more than the last. By counting
 the number of straight lines and preserving them, or
 considering them as qualifying adjectives we
 have the degrees of comparison. There are
 five connecting parts of speech in the above
 character, called *Za Ir on high*. These five
 connecting parts of speech, for verbs, partici-
 ple, prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs.
 In translating this character, the subject
 must be continued until there are as many
 of these connecting parts of speech used as there
 are connections or connecting points found in
 the character. But whenever the character is
 found with one horizontal line, as at (1) the
 subject must be continued until ^{five times} the number
 of connecting parts of speech are used; or the
 full sense of the writer is not conveyed. When
 two horizontal lines occur, the number of con-
 necting parts of speech are continued five times
 further, or five degrees. And when three horizontal
 lines are found, the number of connections are to be
 increased five times further. The character always
 5 parts of speech. increase by one straight line thus 5 x 5 is 25

Title page of "Egyptian Alphabet." Courtesy of Church History Library.

this my object."⁴⁷ Smith never mastered Hebrew, but he studied in earnest and did gain some rudimentary proficiency with the language.

True to his intentions, Joseph Smith maintained a passion for and intermittent study of languages for the rest of his life. In addition to Hebrew, he studied Greek, and in Nauvoo he occasionally cited the Greek New Testament in his sermons.⁴⁸ He also frequently used Latin phrases in sermons and letters.⁴⁹ Toward the end of his life, he made a serious study of the German language.⁵⁰ During the April 1844 general conference, just a few months before he died, he discussed Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and German translations of the Bible in his famous King Follett Discourse and drew on his knowledge of Hebrew to give a translation of Genesis 1:1.⁵¹

Joseph Smith continued his language studies throughout his busy life as occasion would permit. In a sermon about a month after encountering the Kinderhook plates, he drew on his knowledge of biblical languages and introduced his comments by saying, "I will turn linguist."⁵² This shows explicitly that he saw himself occasionally taking on the role of a linguist. It is quite possible that he attempted to translate the Kinderhook plates, not as a prophet, but as a linguist.

The fact that the characters on the Kinderhook plates did not match any known language was not necessarily a deterrent to such an attempt. Stephen Williams, who wrote a history of amateur archaeology, explains there was no professional field of archaeology in Joseph Smith's day: "Archaeology was open to anyone, and the data could be interpreted almost any way and . . . usually was."⁵³ Enthusiastic amateurs were eager to try to decipher ancient script.⁵⁴ Even in the twentieth century, examples can be given from within the field of archaeology of mistranslations, mistaking non-linguistic patterns for actual language, and translating forgeries—all in good faith.⁵⁵

It is easy to imagine Joseph Smith—as someone interested in both language and the archaeology of ancient America—trying to translate the Kinderhook plates as would any linguist or archaeologist. It is also easy to imagine Joseph Smith—as the prophet who translated the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham—trying to translate from the Kinderhook plates by revelation. So, when Joseph Smith attempted to translate from the Kinderhook plates, was he acting as a prophet or was he acting as an amateur linguist? An unbiased examination of the Kinderhook plates episode would have to consider both possibilities and follow the evidence wherever it leads.

CHARLOTTE HAVEN AND TRANSLATION BY REVELATION

One source that suggests the method by which Joseph Smith translated from the Kinderhook plates is a letter written by Charlotte Haven, a young woman who visited Nauvoo in 1843. Haven, a Unitarian, wrote to her "dear home friends" about the Kinderhook plates. She reported that "Mr. Moore," apparently the Reverend George Moore, had shown her the plates and that

they were “half a dozen thin pieces of brass, apparently very old, in the form of a bell about five or six inches long.” Haven continued: “When he showed them to Joseph, the latter said the figures or writing on them was similar to that in which the Book of Mormon was written, and if Mr. Moore could leave them, he thought that by the help of revelation he would be able to translate them. So a sequel to that holy book may soon be expected.”⁵⁶ Haven’s account does not describe how Joseph Smith translated from the Kinderhook plates, but it does purport to tell how he initially expected to translate: by revelation.

Haven’s account is plausible. George Moore wrote in his diary the previous June that Joseph Smith had shown him a transcript of characters from the golden plates of the Book of Mormon.⁵⁷ That earlier encounter, and similarities Moore perceived between the Book of Mormon characters and some of the Kinderhook plates characters, could account for why Moore brought the plates to Joseph Smith. If Joseph Smith also perceived these or other similarities, he may have concluded that he could translate the characters on the Kinderhook plates just as he had been able to translate those on the golden plates.

While this scenario is plausible, its accuracy is uncertain. Although Haven was largely accurate in reporting Nauvoo events, she occasionally displayed a tendency toward overstatement—such as reporting that the Kinderhook plates were about twice as large as their actual size.⁵⁸ Haven, in turn, was restating what she had heard from Moore about what he had heard from Joseph Smith. And it is difficult to assess how accurately Moore understood Joseph Smith’s statements and transmitted them to Haven. So, although there is a plausible scenario in which Joseph Smith might naturally have discussed the idea of translating the Kinderhook plates by revelation, as he had the Book of Mormon, the available sources do not settle this with certainty.

This, however, is not a barrier to further inquiry. Ultimately, the question is not whether Joseph Smith believed he could translate the Kinderhook plates by revelation but what method he actually used to translate the “portion” Clayton reported he translated. And on this question, we do not have to rely on Charlotte Haven’s third-hand report of what Joseph Smith may have said prior to his actual translation effort. We have better sources to work with—sources that describe his translation activities and demonstrate how he derived the translation content.

JOSEPH SMITH’S TRANSLATION OF THE KINDERHOOK PLATES

On May 7, 1843, Joseph Smith and several others examined the Kinderhook plates. From this event, we have three sources that corroborate each

other and indirectly corroborate Clayton's journal entry from a few days earlier. A close examination of these sources indicates that Joseph Smith attempted to translate from the Kinderhook plates by traditional methods. The first of these is Parley P. Pratt's letter discussed earlier, which reported that Joseph Smith displayed both the Kinderhook plates and the characters from his Egyptian papyri to his visitors, allowing them to compare the two. The second is Joseph Smith's own journal, where he notes that either William Smith or Willard Richards (depending on how the abbreviated entry is read) was sent to get a "Hebrew Bible & lexicon." That one of the Apostles was reportedly dispatched to get a Hebrew lexicon suggests that the men who were examining the Kinderhook plates may have been comparing their characters to Hebrew as well as Egyptian characters, languages connected by both the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham. All of this further suggests that the group was taking a traditional approach to translation.

The third of the three sources is a letter one of the group wrote to the editor of the *New York Herald*. It was common in early America for people writing letters to newspapers to use an obvious pseudonym. With tongue in cheek, this correspondent, who was apparently not a Latter-day Saint, wrote from Nauvoo under the name "A Gentile." The *New York Herald* published his letter about the Kinderhook plates, which reported in part: "The plates are evidently brass, and are covered on both sides with hieroglyphics. They were brought up and shown to Joseph Smith. He compared them in my presence with his Egyptian alphabet, which he took from the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, and they are evidently the same characters. He therefore will be able to decipher them."⁵⁹ According to this witness, Joseph Smith compared the characters on the Kinderhook plates to the characters in his "Egyptian Alphabet." Perhaps the "Gentile" made an understandable mistake in associating the "Egyptian Alphabet" with the Book of Mormon instead of the Book of Abraham because Joseph Smith was so much better known for the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith had displayed a transcript of Book of Mormon characters to George Moore several months earlier. So it is not unlikely that Joseph Smith displayed it again on May 7, along with the "Egyptian Alphabet" volume, when visitors came to see the Kinderhook plates. In that case, the juxtaposition of Egyptian characters from both the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham could have easily added to his "Gentile" guest's confusion over which Book of Mormon scripture the "Egyptian Alphabet" characters came from.

The "Gentile" correspondent to the *New York Herald* watched Joseph Smith comparing characters from the plates and from the "Egyptian Alphabet" in a method typical of traditional translation. And, as he wrote, "they are evidently the same characters." The characters were not only compared

but compared favorably. Joseph Smith and others believed they had found matching characters. As the author of the letter put it: “He therefore will be able to decipher them.”

This naturally leads to the question: Which characters in the “Egyptian Alphabet” were found to match characters on the Kinderhook plates and what were the corresponding English definitions for those characters in the “Egyptian Alphabet”? William Clayton’s journal gives us evidence of one such character. A few days earlier, when Clayton wrote that Joseph Smith had translated a portion of the plates, he also wrote that Joseph Smith had said they contained “the history of the person with whom they were found, and he was a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the Ruler of heaven and earth.” This information bears remarkable resemblance to one of the character interpretations in the “Egyptian Alphabet.” The character named “Ha e oop hah” was given the following interpretation: “honor by birth, kingly power by the line of Pharaoh. possession by birth one who reigns upon his throne universally—possessor of heaven and earth, and of the blessings of the earth.”⁶⁰ A careful comparison of this interpretation with the information in William Clayton’s journal reveals their parallel content. In the table below, the parallels are printed with corresponding emphasis:

Comparison of Translation to “Egyptian Alphabet” Character

Joseph Smith told William Clayton	“Ha e oop hah” defined
He was <i>a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh</i> king of Egypt,	Honor <i>by birth</i> , kingly power by the line of Pharaoh ; possession <i>by birth</i> ;
and . . . <i>received his kingdom</i> from the ruler of heaven & earth .	one who <i>reigns upon his throne</i> universally— possessor of heaven and earth , and of the blessings of the earth.

The character named “Ha e oop hah” has the shape of a closed half circle. It could be said to resemble a boat in shape. This character bears some resemblance to one of the characters on the Kinderhook plates.

Of course there are some obvious differences between these two characters. The character on the Kinderhook plates is a closed half circle with four additional lines added to it. However, to put this in historical context, it must be noted that Joseph Smith and those who helped him with the Kirtland Egyptian papers had the understanding that the Egyptian characters on the papyri could be dissected into parts that had meaningful definitions of their own. This linguistic theory is explained in the opening pages of the “Egyptian Alphabet,” just before “Ha e oop hah” is defined.⁶¹ If the extraneous

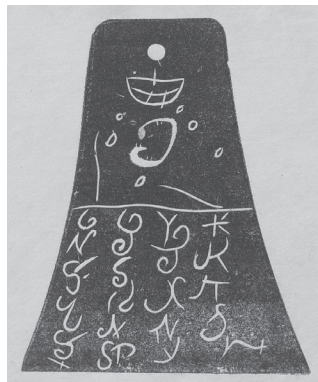


Kinderhook plate character (left) and “Egyptian Alphabet” character (right). Courtesy of Church History Library.

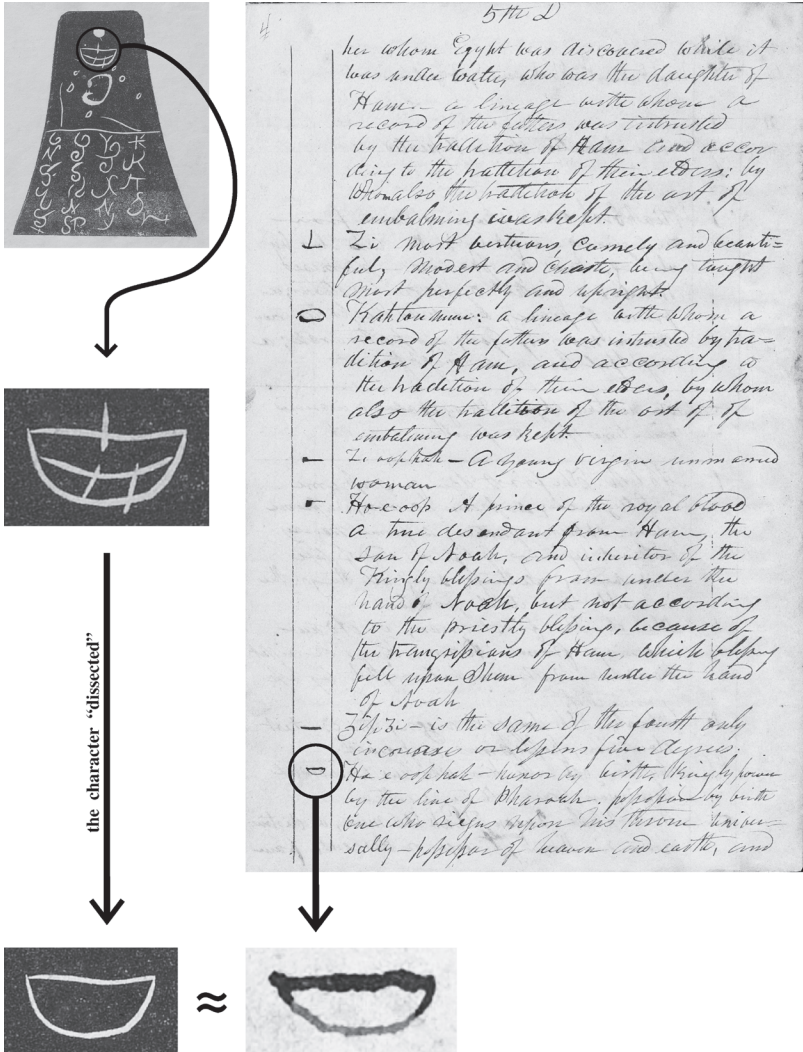
lines are dissected from the boat-shaped character, it bears a close resemblance to the “Ha e oop hah” character in the “Egyptian Alphabet.” On the Kinderhook plates, the boat-shaped character is relatively large and prominently placed at the top of one of the plates. The plates had originally been fastened with a ring, maintaining any intended order. But the ring broke open as the plates were unearthed, and it is doubtful that any sense of order or arrangement was conveyed to Joseph Smith when the plates were lent to him. If Joseph Smith had any guess as to the order of the plates, he would likely have been inclined to begin his translation attempt at the presumed beginning of the inscriptions.

From the facsimiles printed by the Church newspaper, it can be seen that the characters and illustrations on each of the Kinderhook plates are divided by an inscribed line—with a more illustrative section at the top of the plate and with characters inscribed below on the main body of the plate. One of the sides of one of the plates—the last one illustrated in the broadside—differs from the others, rendering the area above the line significantly larger. Also, whereas most of the headings to the plates are filled with illustrations—particularly suns with faces—the plate side with the larger heading features two large characters. The first of these characters is the boat-shaped figure.

Because this side of this plate had a larger heading, and a heading with characters, it would have been a natural place to begin translating. And if Joseph Smith looked for a boat-shaped character in the “Egyptian Alphabet,” it would not have taken him long to find it. This character appears on the fourth page of the volume, which is the second page of characters and their assigned definitions.



Facsimile of Kinderhook plate with boat-shaped character at the top. Courtesy of Church History Library.



Comparison of characters from the Kinderhook plates and Joseph Smith's "Egyptian Alphabet."

The character named "Ha e oop hah" in Joseph Smith's "Egyptian Alphabet" can be seen as the same character featured prominently on the top of one of the Kinderhook plates, and the reported content of Joseph Smith's translation from the Kinderhook plates can be substantially drawn from that character's definition in the "Egyptian Alphabet." It may be that the "portion" of the Kinderhook plates that Joseph Smith translated on or before May 1, 1843, was no more than this single character from the top of one of the plates. It appears that Joseph Smith shared this same translation with the group of men who met a few days later.

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE KINDERHOOK PLATES?

Taken together, these sources indicate that Joseph Smith was attempting to translate the Kinderhook plates by ordinary methods of traditional translation. Furthermore, they show that he was doing so openly, in the company of a group of Church members and nonmembers. In contrast, there is no mention of Joseph Smith using the Urim and Thummim or a seer stone or divine revelation of any kind in any of the sources close to the event. William Clayton mentioned nothing about revelation in his journal entry about the translation of the plates.

As it turned out, the Kinderhook plates were not what they appeared to be. With the benefit of hindsight and modern scientific testing equipment, we see the plates differently than Joseph Smith did. Time has shown that he was mistaken. He mistakenly accepted the Kinderhook plates as authentic artifacts; he mistakenly identified their characters as Egyptian; and he mistakenly thought that he had translated one or more of these characters. However, there is no evidence that Joseph Smith believed he had experienced a revealed translation or that he led others to believe he had.

For over a century, many have argued as to whether the Kinderhook plates episode revealed Joseph Smith as a true or false prophet. Yet a closer examination of the relevant historical sources reveals Joseph Smith acting neither as an inspired prophet nor as a fraudulent imposter. Instead, it reveals an enthusiastic, yet amateur, linguist.

There is a more general lesson to be learned here. Many arguments for and against Joseph Smith's prophetic claims, upon closer examination, turn out to be much more complex than originally framed, or simply fall apart, because they are based on assumptions that turn out to be incorrect. A careful and historically grounded approach is best in evaluating such arguments.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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NOTES

1. W. P. Harris, letter to the editor of the *Times and Seasons*, as published in *Times and Seasons*, Nauvoo, Illinois, May 1, 1843, 186; See also "Singular Discovery—Materials for Another Mormon Book," *Quincy Whig*. Quincy, Illinois, May 3, 1843, 3.
2. Wilbur Fugate, letter to Mr. James Cobb, June 30, 1879; quoted in William Wyl, *Mormon Portraits, or the Truth about Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886*, *Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and His Friends: A Study Based on Fact and Documents* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing, 1886), 207–8.
3. Statement, in *Times and Seasons*, May 1, 1843, 186.

4. "A Brief Account of the Discovery of the Brass Plates Recently Taken from a Mound near Kinderhook, Pike County, Illinois," *Nauvoo Neighbor*, June 24, 1843.
5. Wilbur Fugate, letter to Mr. James Cobb, June 30, 1879, in W. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 208–11.
6. On the Book of Mormon, see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 57–83; Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
7. *Times and Seasons*, May 1, 1843, 186. Charlotte Haven, a young woman who visited Quincy and Nauvoo in 1843, reported in a letter to "dear home friends" on May 2, 1843, that the plates had been brought to Nauvoo by "Joshua Moore." But this "Mr. Joshua Moore, who passes through that place and this in his monthly zigzag tours through the State, traveling horseback," seems to be identical to George Moore, the traveling minister she names in subsequent letters. George Moore's name may have been mistakenly written by Haven or erroneously transcribed by the publisher of her letters. "A Girl's Letters from Nauvoo," *Overland Monthly*, December 1890, 630, spelling standardized.
8. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I. History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet. By Himself*, with an Introduction and Notes by Brigham H. Roberts (repr.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 5:372–78.
9. "Ancient Records," *Times and Seasons*, May 1, 1843, 186; "Ancient Records," *Nauvoo Neighbor*, May 10, 1843.
10. "A Brief Account of the Discovery of the Brass Plates Recently Taken from a Mound in the Vicinity of Kinderhook, Pike County, Illinois," *Nauvoo Neighbor*, June 24, 1843.
11. For examples, see "Fac-Simile of Plates with Engraved Characters taken out of an Ancient Mound in Illinois, in 1843," in Orson Pratt, *A Series of Pamphlets* (Liverpool: R. James, 1851); "Fac Similes of the Plates," *Deseret News*, September 3–10, 1856; "American Antiquities, Corroborative of the Book of Mormon," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, May 7, 1859, 306–7.
12. Wilbur Fugate, letter to Mr. James Cobb, June 30, 1879; quoted in W. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 207–8. See also Wilbur Fugate, letter to James Cobb, April 8, 1878, Theodore Albert Schroeder Papers, 1845–1901, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
13. W. P. Harris, Barry, Pike County, Illinois, letter to Mr. Flagg, Moro, Illinois, April 25, 1855; quoted in "A Hoax," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 5 (July 1912): 271–73.
14. For examples, see James D. Bales, *Book of Mormon?* (Rosemead, CA: Old Paths Book Club, 1958), 89–102; Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, *The God Makers* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1984), 99–100; *Joseph Smith and the Kinderhook Plates* [tract pamphlet] (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, n.d.).
15. Charles A. Shook, letter to James D. Bales; quoted originally in Bales, *Book of Mormon?*, 98.
16. For examples, see B. H. Roberts, *The Book of Mormon*, New Witnesses for God series, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1951), 2:58–64; Welby W. Ricks, "The Kinderhook Plates," *Improvement Era*, September 1962, 636–60.
17. The extant plate is at the Chicago History Museum.
18. Stanley B. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to Be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax," *Ensign*, August 1981, 68–70.
19. Paul R. Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Kinderhook Plates," 1970, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 8–9; Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 74, n. 17.

20. Dean C. Jessee, "The Writing of Joseph Smith's History," *BYU Studies* 11 (Spring 1971): 439–73.
21. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 67–68.
22. Clayton served as the Nauvoo temple recorder, as Nauvoo city treasurer, and as secretary of Nauvoo's Freemasonry lodge. Clayton, "History of the Nauvoo Temple," 18, 30–31; Joseph Smith, Journal, 29 June 1842; Nauvoo City Council Minute Book, 9 September 1842, 101; Nauvoo Masonic Lodge Minute Book, 10 November 1842. All sources found at the Church History Library (hereafter CHL).
23. James B. Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 73.
24. William Clayton, journal, quoted in Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear*, 393.
25. Parley P. Pratt, letter to John Van Cott, May 7, 1843, CHL.
26. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 73.
27. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 73.
28. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 73.
29. Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear*, 62.
30. Clayton kept a journal for Joseph Smith during the last month of his life, presumably at Smith's request. William Clayton, Daily Account of Joseph Smith's Activities, 14–22 June 1844," Appendix 2 in Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *May 1843–June 1844*, vol. 3 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), 331–39.
31. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 73.
32. For some examples, see Truman G. Madsen's discussion of Joseph Smith and the spiritual gift of discernment. Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 41–42, 90.
33. Joseph Smith, letter to Emma Smith, November 4, 1838, Archives of the Community of Christ, Independence, Missouri.
34. For examples, see Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear*, 112–13; Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 10–11; Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, enlarged edition (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministries, 1982), 125, G–I; John E. Hallwas, *Western Illinois Heritage* (Macomb: Illinois Heritage Press, 1983), 77–79.
35. "The Author" [Joseph Smith], "Preface," in *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, NY: E. B. Grandin, 1830), iii–iv.
36. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Eric Carlson (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2005), 77–213.
37. See Mormon 9:32–33.
38. Robert J. Matthews, *"A Plainer Translation": Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 39–40, 252–53.
39. See H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 119–24.

40. "A Fac-Simile from the Book of Abraham. No. 1," Fig. 12, in *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, 703 (Book of Abraham, Facsimile 1, explanation 12); "A Fac-Simile from the Book of Abraham, No. 2," Fig. 4, in *Times and Seasons*, March 15, 1842, foldout between pages 720 and 721 (Book of Abraham, Facsimile 2, explanation 4).
41. "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language," 1835, Kirtland Egyptian Papers, CHL.
42. See, for example, Charles M. Larson, *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992), chapter 9; Christopher C. Smith, "The Dependence of Abraham 1:1–3 on the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 29 (2009): 38–54.
43. Oliver Cowdery, letter to William Frye, December 22, 1835, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, excerpted in appendix A of Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 235–39.
44. See, for example, John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 19–23.
45. Joseph Smith, journal, November 2, 1835, CHL.
46. See entries throughout January, February, and March 1836 in Joseph Smith, journal, Joseph Smith Collection, CHL.
47. Joseph Smith, journal, February 17, 1836; spelling standardized.
48. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 244, 351, 354, 358, 366, 380.
49. See, for example, Joseph Smith, "Journeying," letter to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, September 6, 1842, Revelations Collection, CHL; see also D&C 128:11.
50. This was especially so within the half year preceding his encounter with the Kinderhook plates. Joseph Smith, journal, various entries from January 1–June 3; also Alexander Neibaur, journal, May 24, 1844, CHL.
51. Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 202–3, 207.
52. Joseph Smith, journal, June 11, 1843.
53. Stephen Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 78–79.
54. Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology*, 12, 13.
55. Archaeologists are unsure whether some cylinder seal patterns are lingual or not. Dominique Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 105–6. Noted biblical scholar James Charlesworth claimed to have translated a newly discovered ancient text into prose, but it was later shown to be a basically meaningless writing exercise including some miscellaneous letters, words, and names. Joseph Naveh, "A Medical Document or a Writing Exercise? The So-called 4Q Therapeia," *Israel Exploration Journal* 36, nos. 1–2 (1986): 52–55. Charlesworth later admitted his error. James H. Charlesworth, "A Misunderstood Recently Published Dead Sea Scroll," *Exploration* 1, no. 2 (1994): 2.
56. Charlotte Haven, letter to "My dear home friends," May 2, 1843 as published in "A Girl's Letters from Nauvoo," *The Overland Monthly*, December 1890, 630. As noted above, Haven referred to Moore here as "Joshua," but likely intended Unitarian minister George Moore.
57. George Moore wrote in his diary for June 3, 1842, that he had called on Joseph Smith, and "He showed me some specimens of the hieroglyphics, such as, he says, were on the gold

plates." Moore's diary has been published in Donald Q. Cannon, "Reverend George Moore Comments on Nauvoo, the Mormons, and Joseph Smith," *Western Illinois Regional Studies* 5 (Spring 1982): 6–16.

58. Haven also seems to have misstated information about the Egyptian mummies and papyri. Charlotte Haven, letter to "My Dear Mother," February 19, 1843, as published in "A Girl's Letters from Nauvoo," *Overland Monthly*, December 1890, 628. Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham*, 191–202.

59. "A Gentile," letter to James Gordon Bennett, May 7, 1843, as published in "Late and Interesting from the Mormon Empire on the Upper Mississippi," *New York Herald*, May 30, 1843.

60. "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language," 1835, CHL.

61. See "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language," 1–2.