



CHAPTER 6

The Contents of the Joseph Smith Papyri

THE EXISTING JOSEPH SMITH POPYRI are fragments of two ancient papyri that belonged to Horos, son of Osoroeris, and Semminis, daughter of Eschons.

Horos's scroll contained an introductory genealogy, an unusual picture, and a text which the Egyptians called "Letter of Fellowship made by Isis for her brother Osiris," but which scholars usually call the "Document of Breathings Made by Isis" or "Book of Breathings." The scroll may have contained another text; a quarter of the manuscripts of the Documents of Breathings Made by Isis do, and some evidence from the nineteenth century indicates that this might have been the case. The evidence, however, is not straightforward. Thus, if Horos's scroll did contain another text, we now have no way of determining what that text was.

The Document of Breathings Made by Isis is a letter of recommendation or passport written to allow the possessor to enter the



JOSEPH SMITH PAPYRUS X. THIS CONTAINS A CONTINUATION OF HOROS'S DOCUMENT OF BREATHINGS MADE BY ISIS. © INTELLECTUAL RESERVE, INC.

presence of the gods and join their company. The document describes itself as an initiation designed to revive body and soul, renew the body, and make the individual appear in heaven.

Horos's version of the Document of Breathings Made by Isis is notable for two things. First, it is the earliest known manuscript for this document. Second, it is actually an abbreviated version of the text. Abbreviated versions of other types of documents of breathing are known, but Horos had the only known abbreviated version of the Document of Breathings Made by Isis. The abbreviated versions presume a knowledge of the full version of the text. Sometimes, for



JOSEPH SMITH PAPYRUS XI. THE BEGINNING OF HOROS'S DOCUMENT OF BREATHINGS MADE BY ISIS. THE RIGHT-HAND COLUMN CONTAINS THE INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE USE OF THE DOCUMENT. THE LEFT-HAND COLUMN CONTAINS THE BEGINNING OF THE TEXT. © INTELLECTUAL RESERVE, INC.

example, the abbreviated version will only contain part of a sentence. At other times, entire sections of text are left out. Because religious texts from another culture (particularly one from more than two millennia ago) tend to be obscure anyway, the abridged nature of the text compounds that problem, and large gaps in the papyrus compound it even further. Modern translators of the Joseph Smith Papyri have faced a difficult quandary. They can translate what is actually there—an abbreviated text that has large holes in it—and produce a translation that makes no sense to the reader, or they can translate the fuller versions and produce something that makes more sense because it

is a translation of the text, though not a translation of the particular manuscript that they are supposedly translating. Most translators have chosen the second option, and so most purported translations of the Joseph Smith Papyri are not actually translations of the Joseph Smith Papyri.

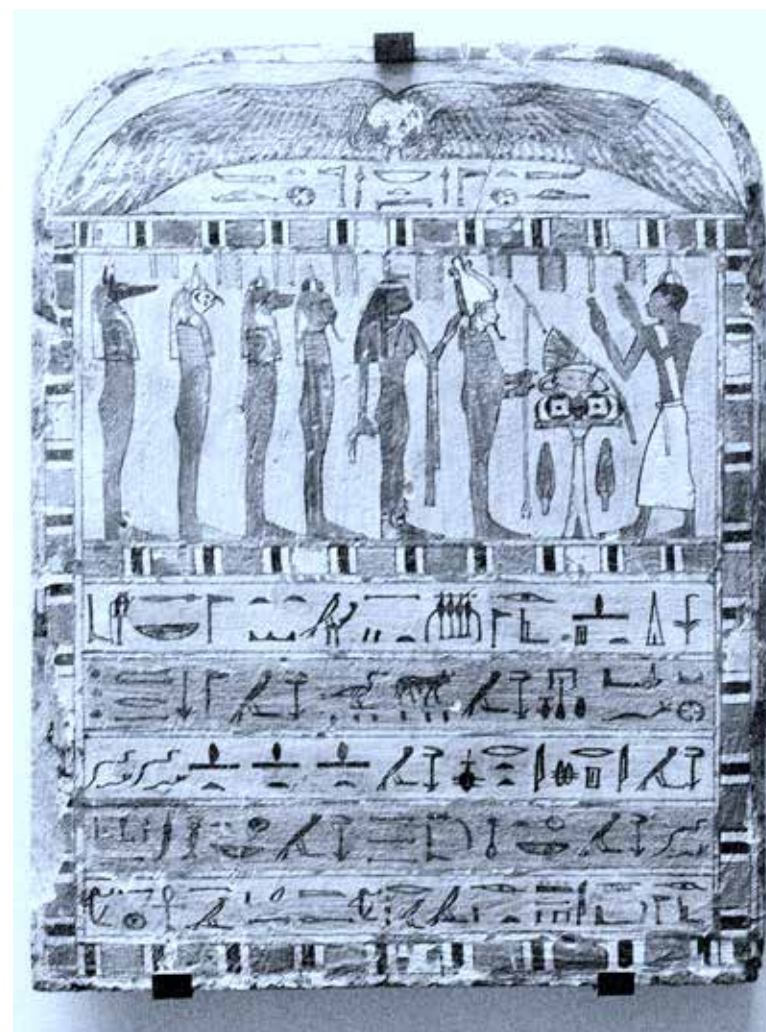
Semminis's scroll contained a Book of the Dead. Originally a very long scroll, it was greatly reduced, and only fragmentary pieces ever reached Joseph Smith. What we call the Book of the Dead the Egyptians called the "Daytime Excursion" or "Daytime Ascension." The Book of the Dead served as a protection for the bearer. It describes its purpose as aiding the spirit in becoming exalted, ascending to and descending from the presence of the gods, and appearing as whatever wanted, wherever wanted.

The sections of Semminis's Book of the Dead in the Joseph Smith Papyri cover part of the introductory chapter, some of the texts dealing with Semminis's being able to appear as various birds or animals, texts allowing her to board the boat of the supreme god and meet with the council of the gods, texts providing her with food and other good things and making her happy, and a text asserting her worthiness to enter into the divine presence.

The contents of the papyri do not seem to match the Book of Abraham. The relationship between the Joseph Smith Papyri and the Book of Abraham now needs to be considered.

FURTHER READING

"New Light on Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papyri." *Improvement Era* 71, no. 2 (1968): 40–40i. This is the first publication (*editio princeps*) of the remaining fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri.



THE DOOR WARDEN OF THE TEMPLE OF AMON, INAROS, PRESENTS OFFERINGS TO OSIRIS, ISIS, AND THE FOUR SONS OF HORUS. LOUVRE N 3387, LOUVRE MUSEUM. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Fragment of an ancient Egyptian papyrus scroll, page 78. The text is written in hieroglyphs and is arranged in vertical columns. The scroll is heavily damaged, with significant portions missing, particularly in the lower half. Several illustrations are interspersed within the text:

- A bird perched on a branch, located in the upper middle section.
- A figure holding a staff, located in the lower middle section.
- A figure holding a staff next to a tall, tiered structure, located in the lower middle section.
- A falcon, located in the lower middle section.
- A figure lying on a bed or couch, located in the lower middle section.

JOSEPH SMITH
PAPYRI V AND
VI, FRAGMENT
OF THE BOOK
OF THE DEAD
OF SEMMINIS.
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Fragment of an ancient Egyptian papyrus scroll, page 79. The text is written in hieroglyphs and is arranged in vertical columns. The scroll is heavily damaged, with significant portions missing, particularly in the lower half. Several illustrations are interspersed within the text:

- A figure holding a staff, located in the upper middle section.
- A figure holding a staff next to a tall, tiered structure, located in the lower middle section.
- A figure holding a staff, located in the lower middle section.
- A falcon, located in the lower middle section.

Coenen, Marc. "Books of Breathings: More Than a Terminological Question." *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 26 (1995): 29–38. This classic article argues that the previous labeling of documents of breathings by Egyptologists was inconsistent, confusing, and at odds with the ancient Egyptian names given to the texts, which were consistent and clear. The author argued that Egyptologists should use the ancient designations, and his renaming of the documents has been followed by specialists ever since. In dealing with the Joseph Smith Papyri, nonspecialists have often retained the older, inconsistent terminology, which can cause confusion. More recently some Egyptologists, notably Martin Stadler, have demonstrated that the Egyptians were not as consistent as Coenen argues.

———. "An Introduction to the *Document of Breathings Made by Isis*." *Revue d'Égyptologie* 49 (1998): 37–45. The author provides an introduction to the various problems associated with the Document of Breathings Made by Isis. He notes that the vignette in Joseph Smith Papyrus I (Facsimile 1) is not used in any other copy of the Document of Breathings Made by Isis and this raises the question of whether the vignette belongs with that work at all.

Herbin, François-René. *Books of Breathing and Related Texts*. London: British Museum, 2008. This book publishes all copies of various documents of breathing found in the British Museum, which has a sizable collection of such texts. It gives a representative sample of the variety of documents of breathing including a number of the abbreviated ones.

Nibley, Hugh W. *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005. An edition of Joseph Smith Papyrus I, XI, and X, this was actually the first modern Egyptological commentary on the Document of Breathings Made by Isis. Nibley uses earlier Egyptian texts to understand the text because that was what was available to him. Since the

original publication of his book, thousands of texts closer in time to the Joseph Smith Papyri have become available. The second edition of the book, published after Nibley's death, did not revise the text to reflect these new sources.

Rhodes, Michael D. *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 4 of *Studies in the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee. Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010. This book is the first full edition of Joseph Smith Papyri II–IX.

———. *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 2 of *Studies in the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002. This book is a more recent edition of Joseph Smith Papyrus I, XI, and X, with better photographs and improved readings.