

Chapter 16

THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

Once W. W. Phelps arrived in Ohio in May 1835, Joseph Smith utilized both Oliver Cowdery and Phelps as scribes. Phelps's most unusual activity in Kirtland, partnering with Cowdery, was acting as scribe for the "translation" of the Egyptian papyri precisely during the same period he was also working on the Doctrine and Covenants and hymnbook projects.

JOSEPH SMITH OBTAINS EGYPTIAN PAPYRI

Late in June, according to a letter from Phelps to his wife, a man came to Kirtland bearing four Egyptian mummies and two papyrus rolls in Egyptian hieroglyphics.¹ Cowdery identified the owner of these antiquity treasures as Michael H. Chandler.² For two years Chandler had been showing his mummies and papyri in various eastern cities, all the while looking for prospective buyers.

These four mummies, along with a purported seven others, were discovered about 1820 in ancient Egyptian tombs on the west bank of the Nile River across from the city of Thebes, now known as Luxor, presumably by Italian Piedmontese adventurer Antonio Lebolo. Lebolo, a French citizen, had gone to Egypt along with many other Frenchmen to seek out the ancient artifacts. In effect, though, they plundered the country of many of its historical treasures. During Napoleon's reign, Lebolo had been a gendarme (or policeman) in French employ in Milan, which was then under Napoleon's control. Lebolo had obtained a license from the French consulate in Egypt to conduct his diggings. The eleven mummies that eventually found their way to the United States were carefully preserved. Lebolo had shipped them to Trieste, in northern Italy, where he hoped to sell them. But Lebolo died in 1830, apparently before receiving any profit from them.³

After Lebolo's death, the mummies and papyri were mysteriously shipped to New York Harbor. Although Oliver Cowdery said that Michael Chandler was Lebolo's nephew, and thus an heir to these Egyptian treasures (information that Cowdery probably got from Chandler himself), no connection, familial or otherwise, has been proved between Chandler and Lebolo.⁴

Michael Chandler, an Irish immigrant to the United States living in Philadelphia, stated that in the late winter or early spring of 1833 he had been willed eleven Egyptian mummies and other artifacts contained in coffins. He allegedly claimed them at the New York Customs House, and shortly thereafter he arranged to display them in Philadelphia arcades and museums. After several weeks in Philadelphia, where he also sold five mummies, Chandler took his cache to Baltimore. Later, he also displayed them in Lancaster, Harrisburg, and Pittsburg, Pennsylvania; Cincinnati, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; and New Orleans, Louisiana. By the spring of 1835, when he came to Cleveland to display his mummies, Chandler's original eleven mummies had dwindled to four.⁵

All throughout his travels, Chandler had heard Joseph Smith's name used, mostly in derision, regarding the latter's alleged ability to translate ancient languages. When Chandler discovered that Joseph Smith was only a few miles from Cleveland in Kirtland, he arranged to visit the Mormon prophet and show him the remaining mummies and papyri.

Phelps was probably with Joseph Smith at the moment that Michael Chandler arrived in Kirtland and met Joseph Smith. The day was likely Tuesday, June 30, 1835.⁶ In any event, Phelps, who worked part of most weekdays with the Prophet, would have heard of Chandler's arrival shortly after it occurred. Phelps wrote his wife, "As no one could translate these writings they were presented to President Smith."⁷ This confirms the statement recorded in Joseph Smith's official history: "As Mr. Chandler had been told I could translate them, he brought me some of the characters [from the papyri rolls], and I gave him the interpretation."⁸ Cowdery also added, "The morning Mr. Chandler first presented his papyrus to bro.—Smith, he was shown, by the latter, a number of characters like those upon the writings of Mr. C. which were previously copied from the plates, containing the history of the Nephites, or book of Mormon."⁹ After looking at Joseph Smith's translation of some of the hieroglyphs over the weekend, Chandler presented the Prophet with the following certificate on Monday, July 6: "This is to make known to all who may be desirous, concerning the knowledge of Mr. Joseph Smith, Jun., in deciphering the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic characters in my possession, which I have, in many eminent cities, showed to the most learned; and, from the information that I could even learn, or meet with, I find that of Mr. Joseph Smith, Jun., to correspond in the most minute matters."¹⁰

It seems obvious looking back now in retrospect that Chandler was duplicitous in writing out this certificate. The Rosetta Stone, which gave Egyptologists their first key to interpreting Egyptian hieroglyphs, was still being deciphered by scholars in Europe. No knowledge of the Rosetta Stone's ongoing deciphering had yet reached America's shores by 1835.¹¹ Thus no American scholar would have been in a position to give more than an educated guess as to the meaning of the characters. How then would Chandler have known if Joseph Smith's translation would have had any validity or not? It appears that

Chandler was simply eager to unload the rest of his mummies and papyri for a good price and that, in an attempt to do this, he gave the flattering certificate to Joseph Smith.¹²

Joseph Smith decided early on after seeing the papyri that he wanted to have them. But Chandler would sell the papyri only if the mummies were also part of the deal, and he asked a high price for the package. Joseph Smith quickly scoured through Kirtland to find church members to contribute money to buy Chandler's remaining Egyptian cache. Within only two or three days, the requisite \$2,400 was gathered and Chandler paid off. This was a huge sum of money, maybe worth more than \$60,000 in early twenty-first-century currency. It certainly demonstrates how eager Joseph Smith was to obtain the papyri, given that the church was drastically short on funds and that the completion of the Kirtland Temple and the publication of the Doctrine and Covenants were so pressing. The two largest contributors of this sum were Simeon Andrews and Joseph Coe, two wealthy members of the church at the time who gave \$800 each. The balance came from separate contributions of many other members, perhaps a small amount from Phelps also.

BOOKS OF ABRAHAM AND JOSEPH

Phelps recorded the divinely inspired reasons for obtaining the papyri: "[Joseph Smith] soon knew what they were and said that the rolls of papyrus contained a sacred record kept by Joseph in Pharaoh's court in Egypt and the teachings of Father Abraham. God has so ordered it that these writings and mummies have been brought into the Church." He also was convinced that "these records of old times, when we translate and print them in a book, will make a good witness for the Book of Mormon." Phelps, with his enthusiasm again showing for the revelations that came through Joseph Smith, testified, "There is nothing secret or hidden that shall not be revealed."¹³ In Joseph Smith's official history for early July 1835, the following appears:

Soon after this, some of the Saints at Kirtland purchased the mummies and papyrus, a description of which will appear hereafter, and with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, etc.,—a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them. Truly we can say, the Lord is beginning to reveal the abundance of peace and truth.¹⁴

John Whitmer, the official church historian at this time in 1835 and a member of Joseph Smith's inner circle, along with Phelps, wrote in his record, "Joseph the Seer saw these Record[s] and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records, which gave an account of our forefathers, Much of which was written by Joseph of Egypt who was sold by his brethren. Which when all translated will be a pleasing history and of great value to the saints."¹⁵ All extant early sources agree that Joseph Smith felt he had discovered among the papyri both the records of the biblical Abraham and his great-grandson Joseph, both of whom had spent extensive time in Egypt.

Oliver Cowdery explained that “the language in which this record [from the papyri] is written is very comprehensive, and many of the hieroglyphics exceedingly striking.” He felt that the evidence was strong “that they [the papyri] were written by persons acquainted with the history of the creation, the fall of man, and more or less of the correct ideas of notions of the Deity.” Cowdery was convinced that these records “must go so far towards convincing the rational mind of the correctness and divine authority of the holy scriptures, and especially that part which has ever been assailed by the infidel community, as being a fiction.”¹⁶

EGYPTIAN ALPHABET AND GRAMMAR

Once Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and W. W. Phelps obtained the papyri, they spent most of July studying them. The official history, likely written by Phelps in behalf of Joseph Smith, states, “The remainder of this month, I 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.”¹⁷ Historian Samuel Brown pointed out another significant connection between Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps:

His [Phelps’s] enthusiasm mixed with that of his prophet during the first weeks of their encounter with the ancient documents. Phelps, like the majority of his peers, had believed in the mystical nature of hieroglyphs since at least 1834, when he wrote that the “Egyptians could astonish the universe . . . concealing their arts in mystical characters or hieroglyphics” (“Reflections for the Fourth of July, 1834,” *EMS* 2, no. 22 [July 1834]: 173). In this respect, he and his prophet joined a chorus of other [contemporary] voices concerned with the deep meaning of hieroglyphs and primal language.¹⁸

Apparently, Phelps played a major role with this project in July because the document known as the “Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language” is mostly in his handwriting. This is a curious document located in the historical archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁹ The manuscripts connected with this Egyptian-oriented document, along with other official historical documents, came across the plains to Salt Lake City and were housed in the church’s historical office. In 1935 Brigham Young University researchers Sidney B. Sperry and James R. Clark, with the aid of assistant church historian A. William Lund, discovered a bound, ruled journal about eight by twelve inches with the label “Egyptian Alphabet” on the spine.²⁰

SPORADIC WORK ON THE PAPYRI

The month of August 1835 saw little if any further work done on the Egyptian papyri. Joseph Smith’s official history contains minutes and accounts of important high council meetings on August 4, 8, and 10 presided over by the church presidents Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Hyrum Smith, David Whitmer, John Whitmer, and W. W. Phelps.²¹ Sometime after August 10, Joseph Smith and Frederick G. Williams

journeyed to Michigan on a mission that historians have been unable to explain. The church was suffering severe financial burdens. Perhaps this was a financial mission of some kind; many church leaders and elders went on such short-term missions during this time period. The Prophet had relatives of his mother in Pontiac, Michigan, so he must have at least visited them.

When Joseph Smith returned to Kirtland on Sunday, August 23, he became so caught up in other projects that he did not return directly to the papyri. These projects included more high council proceedings, speaking to the Saints on the duties of husbands and wives, writing a lengthy treatise to missionary elders through the pages of the *Messenger and Advocate*, entertaining a stream of visitors to his home, and welcoming back the Twelve Apostles from their initial missionary journeys. In the second week of September, Phelps received his assignment to finish the hymnbook. Phelps no doubt longed to be back on the Egyptian project, for he lamented to Sally, "Nothing has been doing in the translation of the Egyptian record for a long time, and probably will not for some time to come."²² Possibly on his own or together with Oliver Cowdery, he continued to dabble with the Egyptian alphabet and grammar.

Formal work on the papyri recommenced finally on Thursday, October 1, 1835. Oliver Cowdery, the scribe assigned to keep Joseph Smith's journal, recorded, "This after noon labored on the Egyptian alphabet, in company with brsr. O. Cowdery and W. W. Phelps: The system of astronomy was unfolded."²³ The official history for that date says, "This afternoon I labored on the Egyptian alphabet, in company with Brothers Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps, and during the research, the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients unfolded to our understanding, the particulars of which will appear hereafter."²⁴ Clearly, these three brethren were still working on the Egyptian alphabet and grammar. Cowdery as scribe kept the Prophet's journal; Phelps kept the Egyptian alphabet and grammar.

The three did not get back to work on the papyri until the next Wednesday afternoon, October 7. During the interim, the Prophet was constantly busy with managing high council business, holding preaching meetings, laying plans for the School of the Prophets, preparing for endowment ordinances in the forthcoming temple, caring for the poor, visiting the sick, and worrying about finances of the church. In a meeting with the Twelve, Joseph Smith "exhibited to them the ancient records in my possession and gave explanation of the same."²⁵ Joseph's journal for October 7 stated, "This afternoon I recommenced translating the ancient records."²⁶

It is unclear from either Joseph Smith's journal or history how often Phelps and Cowdery got together with the Prophet to work on either the translation or the Egyptian alphabet and grammar. Joseph was constantly barraged with other concerns and found it most difficult to get back to the work of translating that which undoubtedly interested him the most. He was especially anxious about the deathly sickness of both his father and the wife of his brother Samuel. (Joseph Smith Sr. and Mary Bailey Smith survived.) Joseph's journal also betrays some domestic concerns that the Prophet had to settle at

home.²⁷ Oliver's journal for Joseph referred to the Prophet exhibiting the papyri to a number of people who came by the office of the presidency on October 19.²⁸

One solution to Joseph Smith's pressing administration needs was to hire a new scribe in addition to Cowdery and Phelps. On Thursday, October 29, Joseph's record stated that the Prophet hired Warren Parrish for fifteen dollars per month. That same day Smith and Phelps displayed the Egyptian mummies to Bishop Edward Partridge upon the latter's return from a proselytizing mission.²⁹

Parrish became acquainted about this time with the Egyptian papyri in order to take over as the main scribe on that project. Phelps was assigned in early November to work almost full-time at the printing office to produce the reprint of *The Evening and the Morning Star*, complete the hymnbook, help John Whitmer get caught up on the backlogged *Messenger and Advocate*, ensure the *Northern Times* was up to date, and assist in distributing the Doctrine and Covenants.³⁰

Parrish became Smith's assistant in working further on the Book of Abraham and related Egyptian projects. The handwriting on the Book of Abraham manuscript, the Egyptian alphabet and grammar documents, and Joseph Smith's diary changes from that of Phelps or Cowdery to that of Parrish. This took place in mid-November 1835.³¹

Over the next three months, Joseph Smith often displayed the Egyptian papyri, the mummies, and occasionally the translation to interested onlookers. The Prophet was certainly pleased with these artifacts and the translation he was conducting.³²

PUBLICATION OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

During later years (including when Phelps would be out of the church from November 1838 to June 1840), many events took place leading to the publication of the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, a body of scripture canonized by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Warren Parrish served as Joseph Smith's scribe on the Egyptian documents, including the Book of Abraham, in November 1835 and in early 1837. "In late 1837, it appears that church leaders planned to publish some of the Egyptian-related materials, likely the Book of Abraham." Willard Richards and Reuben Hedlock were authorized to procure means to print these records.³³

Relatively little took place with the Book of Abraham manuscript while the church and Joseph Smith suffered through a massive apostasy in 1837–38, his flight from Ohio to Missouri, the exodus of many Mormons from Ohio to Missouri, the Missouri Mormon War of 1838, and the exile of the Saints from Missouri to Illinois in 1838–39. However, on May 6, 1838, in Far West, Missouri, Joseph Smith taught the Saints about the mysteries of the kingdom of God, "giving them a history of the plannets &c and of Abrahams writings upon the Plannettary System."³⁴

After Joseph Smith had fled from his Missouri persecutors and established the Saints in Nauvoo, Illinois, he declared on June 18, 1840, that he knew it was his duty to finish an office so that he could "devote himself exclusively" to the spiritual realm, recommence "the work of translating the Egyptian records," and "wait upon the Lord for such revelations as may be suited to the conditions and circumstances of the Church."³⁵ No extant records

TIMES AND SEASONS.

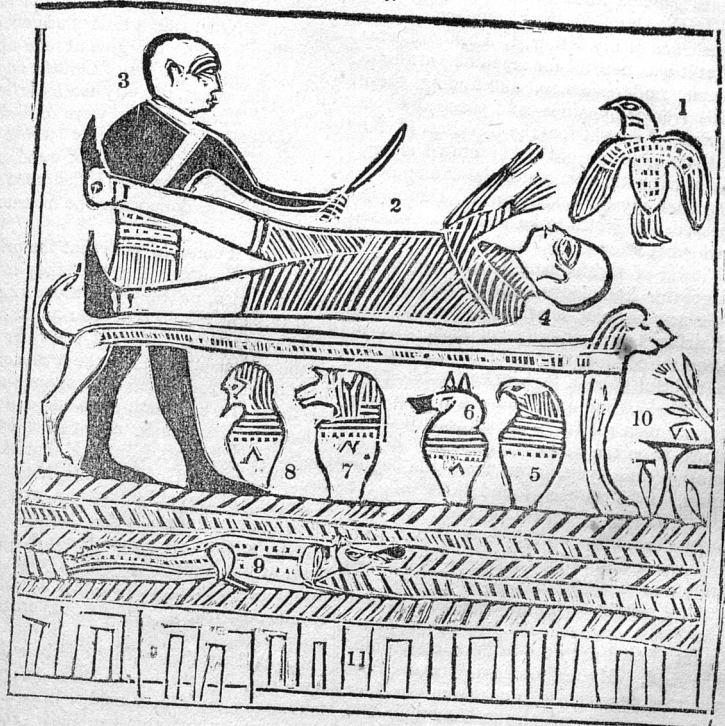
"Truth will prevail."

Vol. III. No. 9.]

CITY OF NAUVOO, ILL. MARCH, 1, 1842.

[Whole No. 45.]

A FAC-SIMILE FROM THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM.
NO. 1.



EXPLANATION OF THE ABOVE CUT.

- Fig. 1.—The Angel of the Lord.
2. Abraham, fastened upon an Altar.
3. The Idolatrous Priest of Elkenah attempting to offer up Abraham as a sacrifice.
4. The Altar for sacrifice, by the Idolatrous Priests, standing before the Gods of Elkenah, Libnah, Mahmachrah, Korash, and Pharaoh.
5. The Idolatrous God of Elkenah.
6. The " " " Libnah.
7. The " " " Mahmachrah.
8. The " " " Korash.
9. The " " " Pharaoh.
10. Abraham in Egypt.
11. Designed to represent the pillars of Heaven, as understood by the Egyptians.
12. Raukeeyang, signifying expanse, or the firmament, over our heads; but in this case, in relation to this subject, the Egyptians meant it to signify Shamau, to be high, or the heavens: answering to the Hebrew word, Shaumahyeem.

A facsimile from the Book of Abraham published in the Times and Seasons, March 1, 1842.

show when the Prophet actually got back to the Book of Abraham, but in February 1842 Joseph Smith referred to publishing “the record of Father Abraham.”³⁶ (The actual text manuscripts of the Book of Abraham located in the Church History Library are in the handwriting, in turn, of W. W. Phelps, Warren Parrish, and Willard Richards.)

In January and February 1842, Joseph Smith turned over printing operations of the church to the Twelve Apostles.³⁷ The Prophet named himself the editor of the newspaper, but he was only the nominal editor. Phelps was Smith’s representative in the printing office and was the de facto editor of the paper (as discussed in chapter 24).

Joseph worked in February and March with Reuben Hedlock, who prepared the three woodcut drawings from the papyri that would accompany the Book of Abraham text.³⁸ In the two March issues and the May 16, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons*, the Book of Abraham finally appeared in print. Phelps at this point had everything to do with the publication of the Book of Abraham, including assisting in editing the actual text. The translation began with this headline: “A Translation of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands, from the Catecombs of Egypt, purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand upon papyrus.”³⁹ This statement is not part of the Book of Abraham scripture text itself. A similar statement in Phelps’s handwriting appeared as a preface to Abraham’s record (present-day Abraham 1:1–2:18, written in 1835): “Translation of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand upon papyrus and found in the CataCombs of Egypt.”⁴⁰ Logically, it was Phelps who inserted this 1842 headline or preface, which also appears as a preface to the official Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, including the latest 2013 edition.

Nearly a year after the Book of Abraham was published, in February 1843, Phelps, as one of the editors of the *Times and Seasons*, wrote, “We would further state that we have the promise of Br. Joseph, to furnish us with further extracts from the Book of Abraham.”⁴¹ This demonstrates that Joseph Smith intended to publish more from the Book of Abraham or, possibly, from the Book of Joseph. Joseph Smith’s history for November 15, 1843, recorded, “Suggested the idea of preparing a grammar of the Egyptian language.”⁴² Nothing else from the Egyptian manuscripts was ever published in Nauvoo by the church before the Prophet’s death on June 27, 1844. No further translations have been located in the church’s historical archives.

PHELPS’S CONNECTION TO THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

What was the role of William W. Phelps with the Book of Abraham and the so-called Egyptian alphabet and grammar? It was considerable, even as was his scribal role in transcribing the text of the Book of Abraham. The bulk of the alphabet and grammar portion of these papers is in Phelps’s handwriting.⁴³

What are we to make of the unusual Egyptian alphabet and grammar? What significance did it have in the creation of the Book of Abraham? What is Phelps’s part in creating the Egyptian alphabet and grammar? Answers to these questions are not easy to come by since extant documents do not describe the process of putting together the Egyptian

alphabet and grammar. If we take the July 1835 entry in Joseph Smith's official history at face value, the Prophet originated the idea of the grammar. But now that we know that staff historians and not Joseph Smith composed these lines, and not knowing how carefully the Prophet edited them, we cannot be entirely sure of their accuracy. In any event, these descriptions are scanty: "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."⁴⁴ The *modus operandi* of developing the Egyptian alphabet and grammar is definitely not described.⁴⁵

Modern researchers of the Egyptian alphabet and grammar find numerous pages containing English-language descriptions and pronunciation guides to Egyptian characters. It appears to be some kind of translation guide. In other Kirtland Egyptian manuscripts, portions of the present Book of Abraham text in the Pearl of Great Price are recorded in the hand of Phelps, with Egyptian characters in the left margin, hinting that for every character on the left there is a paragraph of translation on the right. No wonder, then, that one could preliminarily conclude that Joseph Smith, along with his scribes W.W. Phelps, Oliver Cowdery, and Warren Parrish, labored on the Egyptian alphabet and grammar and then used it as a tool to translate the Book of Abraham.⁴⁶

REDISCOVERY OF THE JOSEPH SMITH PAPYRI

This may have remained the standard interpretation except for the surprising discovery in 1967 that some of Joseph Smith's Egyptian papyri were in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Dr. Aziz S. Atiya, director of the University of Utah Middle East Center, was electrified when he saw these documents in the course of his research at the museum. Though not a Latter-day Saint, Dr. Atiya helped negotiate with the museum in behalf of the church to purchase the eleven papyri fragments.⁴⁷ Since 1967 these fragments have been known as the "Joseph Smith Papyri."

This discovery was hailed by Latter-day Saints as an opportunity to vindicate their claim that the Book of Abraham was an authentic translation by Joseph Smith of these papyri. Opponents were perhaps even more delighted because they saw in this discovery the chance to expose Joseph Smith as a fraud. In the February 1968 issue of the *Improvement Era*, the church published reproductions of the eleven rediscovered papyri and one additional related piece that had just come to light despite having been in the church historical archives for years. Church leaders assigned the papyri to Dr. Hugh Nibley, Brigham Young University professor of history and religion, who directed the church's investigation and research on the material. Immediately, a number of qualified Egyptologists studied the papyri reproductions and then gradually published their findings. In subsequent years, a plethora of material has been produced on the papyri and the Book of Abraham by apologist and critic, by philologist and amateur, by friend and foe.⁴⁸

Generally speaking, these rediscovered Joseph Smith Papyri have been ascertained by scholars, both in and out of the church, to be part of ancient Egyptian religious documents known as the Book of Breathings, a greatly reduced version of the Book of the Dead. These religious documents were placed in the tombs of deceased Egyptian nobility

to accompany them on their eternal journey. Brigham Young University Egyptologist John Gee explains that the Joseph Smith Papyri containing the Book of Breathings material do not correspond with the Book of Abraham but rather can be dated likely to the second century BC.⁴⁹

HOW WAS THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM TRANSLATED?

So how then did Joseph Smith come up with the translation of the Book of Abraham? The following two possible explanations, or a combination of the two, have been offered by present-day Mormon scholars:

1. The translation came from *different* papyri than the rediscovered Joseph Smith Papyri. Oliver Cowdery described the papyri that Joseph used in the translation as “beautifully written on papyrus, with black, and a small part red, ink or paint, in perfect preservation.”⁵⁰ However, the existing Joseph Smith Papyri are now in an extremely poor state of preservation. Contemporary descriptions of Joseph Smith and the papyri seem to indicate that the Prophet had more papyri than those rediscovered.⁵¹
2. Joseph Smith did not translate in the traditional sense but was a *translator* in the prophetic sense. His calling was to convey the thoughts of the ancients to his own generation by any and all means that the Spirit put at his disposal. His translations of this order include the Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses (also in the Pearl of Great Price, along with the Book of Abraham), the Joseph Smith Translation (JST, also sometimes known as the Inspired Version of the Bible), and a translated version of a record made on parchment by the Apostle John (found in D&C 7). The methodology Joseph Smith used to “translate” these documents is far from clear to us today. Wilford Woodruff, who was a witness to the preparations of the Book of Abraham for publication in the *Times and Seasons*, recorded in his journal on February 19, 1842, “The Lord is blessing Joseph with power to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of God; to translate through the Urim and Thummim ancient records and hieroglyphics old as Abraham or Adam which caused our hearts to burn within us while we behold their glorious truths opened unto us.”⁵² Joseph Fielding Smith explained that when early brethren referred to the Urim and Thummim, they probably were thinking of the seer stone instead, because the Urim and Thummim were given back to the Angel Moroni.⁵³ Thus Joseph Smith may have used the seer stone in his “translation” of the Book of Abraham, particularly in the stages completed in Nauvoo. A knowledge of the truthfulness of Joseph Smith’s translation is strictly a matter of faith. The Book of Abraham may have been revealed to Joseph Smith much like the Book of Moses was revealed to him. The role of the papyri may simply have been as a catalyst to cause Joseph to ponder about Egyptian things and the relationship of Abraham and Joseph to ancient Egypt. Then he may have asked significant questions, as he did in the process of “translating” the Bible, and then received revelation such as he received in D&C 74, 76, 77, 86, 91, 113, and 132.⁵⁴

Faithful Latter-day Saint scholars also contend that the Book of Abraham should be judged on its own merits. It compares most favorably to pseudepigraphic works (i.e., those not found in the biblical canon) on the writings of Abraham, thus demonstrating that Joseph Smith did not concoct the contents of the Book of Abraham. It also contains many precepts that connect with temple worship, ideas that were revealed to Abraham anciently.⁵⁵

Again, then, how did Joseph Smith's scribe William W. Phelps fit into the translation process of the Book of Abraham? According to Phelps's letters to his wife, he believed that Joseph Smith was actually translating from papyri. The Egyptian alphabet and grammar documents, mostly in the handwriting of Phelps, lead to the same conclusion. No matter how Joseph Smith may have accomplished the translation of the early parts of the Book of Abraham, Phelps may have thought that the translation came from the papyri and that the Egyptian alphabet and grammar was a tool in the translation.

Hugh Nibley has suggested that Phelps, whom he identified as "the best-educated man in Kirtland," did most of the composing of the Egyptian alphabet and grammar himself. Part of his argument is that "the grammar and spelling throughout [the Egyptian alphabet and grammar] are very nearly perfect, which means that they are not Joseph Smith's." Nibley also added, "It was not the habit of Joseph Smith to suppress his revelations," and if the Prophet intended to publish the Egyptian alphabet and grammar as inspired material, he certainly would have. Nibley felt that Phelps wanted so much to help in the actual translation effort of the Book of Abraham that he produced the Egyptian alphabet and grammar. Phelps was both enterprising and vain in this attempt, Nibley posited.⁵⁶ However, another argument is that Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and W. W. Phelps participated together in the Egyptian alphabet and grammar, that the "textual evidence strongly suggests that Joseph Smith was the primary author of the Alphabet and Grammar documents and that he used them as a translation key for portions of the Book of Abraham."⁵⁷

My personal conclusion is that Phelps added many of his own concepts to the Egyptian alphabet and grammar after Joseph Smith started the process. I feel that as Joseph Smith got further along with the translation of the Book of Abraham, especially during the Nauvoo period, he no longer used the Egyptian alphabet and grammar for any purpose. In any event, it is not canonized and in no way represents doctrine of the LDS Church.

PHELPS'S CONNECTION TO BOOK OF ABRAHAM DOCTRINES

Phelps forever kept close to his heart the doctrines he learned and cherished while he wrote down new truths Joseph Smith received from the Book of Abraham. No doubt Smith, Cowdery, and Phelps often reflected in conversation about these concepts. Perhaps they knew of additional insights that came through revelation but did not appear in published versions of the Book of Abraham. On the other hand, in his enthusiasm for new doctrine, Phelps may have come up with speculative doctrine on his own—ideas that may have been related to Joseph Smith's revelations but did not actually originate with him.

An example may be Phelps's somewhat garbled statement in the *Times and Seasons* several months after the Prophet's assassination: "Jesus Christ, whose goings forth, as the prophets said, have been from old, from eternity: and that eternity, agreeably to the records found in the catacombs of Egypt, has been going on in this system, (not this world) almost two thousand five hundred and fifty five millions of years. . . . It almost tempts the flesh to fly to God, or muster faith like Enoch to be translated and see and know as we are seen and known!"⁵⁸ The 2,555,000,000 years that Phelps seems to be alluding to can be arrived at by multiplying 1,000 (referring to the number of years for Kolob to rotate on its axis) by 7 (referring to seven separate time periods for the earth's creation) by 365 (the number of days in an earth year). The Creation and Kolob are concepts strongly discussed in present-day Abraham chapters 3–5. Kolob is the planet nearest to the throne of God.⁵⁹ The number of years mentioned in this article appears to be Phelpsian doctrine, based on Phelps's own musings and not learned from Joseph Smith.

A few months later, in 1845, Phelps referred in a fictional piece ("Paracletes") to Book of Abraham types of ideas: the noble leaders on earth, free agency, unending time, unending glory, innumerable multiplicity of kingdoms and spheres of action, time being divided into seven parts, the Gods' organizing the world, and the sanctification of millions.⁶⁰

In any event, Phelps loved to think about and probably to preach about the unique and esoteric Mormon doctrines presently found in the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham. As he wrote in his earlier *Times and Seasons* piece, his soul yearned to "fly" to the presence of God.

Evidently, Phelps retained this fantasy, for in 1856 he first published in the *Deseret News* his poem "There is no End," otherwise known as "If You Could Hie to Kolob." Clearly, the origin of the ideas in this poem, which has become a popular Mormon hymn, is the Book of Abraham.

If you could hie to Kolob,
In th' twinkling of an eye,—
And then continue onward,
With that same speed to fly:

D'ye think that you could ever,
Through all eternity,
Find out the generation
Where Gods began to be?

Or see the grand beginning,
Where space did not extend?
Or view the last creation,
Where Gods and matter end?

Me thinks the spirit whispers—
"No man has found 'pure space',
Nor seen the outside curtains
Where nothing has a place."

The works of Gods⁶¹ continue,
 And worlds and lives abound;
 Improvement and progression
 Have one eternal round.

There is no end to matter;
 There is no end to space;
 There is no end to spirit;
 There is no end to race.

There is no end to virtue;
 There is no end to might;
 There is no end to wisdom;
 There is no end to light;

There is no end to union;
 There is no end to youth;
 There is no end to priesthood;
 There is no end to truth.

There is no end to glory;
 There is no end to love;
 There is no end to being;—
 Grim Death sleeps not above.”⁶²

Even though Phelps was originally inspired by the doctrines of the Book of Abraham in composing this poem, not all of the doctrines originate from the Book of Abraham. This may possibly hint at further ideas that Joseph Smith and Phelps discussed privately back in Kirtland while they worked together on the manuscript, but more likely Phelps put doctrines into the poem that Joseph Smith further elucidated during the Nauvoo period. Phelps knew all of those too and could easily have added them. It is also possible that Phelps extrapolated doctrines of his own. He also knew Elder Orson Pratt of the Twelve, who by 1856 had spoken and written of such cosmic things.

In the final assessment, Phelps played an important role as a scribe in Joseph Smith's early work with the Egyptian papyri and Book of Abraham manuscript. Phelps's contemporary letters to his wife Sally demonstrate not only his early appreciation for Joseph Smith's new discoveries but also his enthusiasm to bring forth the Book of Abraham, which the LDS Church now has, at least in part, and the Book of Joseph, which it does not have. And Phelps himself helped instill among the Latter-day Saints a love for the esoteric and uplifting doctrines found in the Book of Abraham.

NOTES

1. WWPL, July 19–20, 1835, 555–56.
2. “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” *M&A* 2, no. 3 (December 1835): 233–37. Oliver Cowdery’s report, based apparently on what he learned from Michael Chandler, unfortunately contains a number of factual errors, as learned by modern researchers James R. Clark, Jay M. Todd, and H. Donl Peterson. For the historical background to the mummies and the papyri, see John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 1–11; James R. Clark, *The Story of the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 62–93; Jay M. Todd, *The Saga of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 7–149; “BYU Professor [H. Donl Peterson] Tracing Path of Book of Abraham Papyri,” *Ensign*, June 1985, 75–76; H. Donl Peterson, *The Pearl of Great Price: A History and Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 36–42; H. Donl Peterson, “The History and Significance of the Book of Abraham,” in *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 2: *The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 161–81; and H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 1–176. For a summary on the background to the papyri, see *JSP*, D4:361–64; “Introduction to Book of Abraham Manuscripts,” Joseph Smith Papers Project, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-book-of-abraham-manuscripts>.
3. In recent years, a letter has come to light that indicates that Lebolo did not own the artifacts and that he may have been more the middleman who intended to sell them for the most profit he could obtain for himself and his supervisor, Bernadino Drovetti. *Lettres de Bernadino Drovetti consul de France a Anlexandrie (1803–1830)*, ed. Sylvie Guichard (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2003), 459. My thanks to John Gee for pointing me to this letter and for his translation of it.
4. Todd, *Saga of the Book of Abraham*, 38–41; Peterson, *Pearl of Great Price*, 40–41; Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 87–88.
5. Chandler’s experiences are documented in Peterson, “History and Significance of the Book of Abraham,” 161–62; Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 88–102, 167–76; *JSP*, D5:71–73, 72n308, 73nn310–312. It is not altogether clear that Chandler even owned the papyri; he was more of a huckster who showed the mummies for profit.
6. I arrive at the date from the following evidence. In his July 19–20, 1835, letter to Sally, Phelps wrote, “On the last of June four Egyptian mummies were brought here.” I believe this means the last day of June, which was the thirtieth. In Oliver Cowdery’s 1835 *Messenger and Advocate* account, he wrote, “[Chandler] visited this place the last of June, or first of July.” In Joseph Smith’s official history (MHC, vol. B-1, 595–96; *HC*, 2:235), the date of July 3 is given for Chandler’s arrival. That history was written by Willard Richards with the help of Phelps in 1843 in Nauvoo. I postulate that Chandler arrived on Tuesday, June 30, and displayed his mummies. John Whitmer stated in his history that Chandler exhibited his mummies in Kirtland. See “The Book of John Whitmer,” in *JSP*, H2:86. Chandler probably discussed his mummies and papyri with Joseph Smith and possibly Cowdery and Phelps that day. Then on July 3, a Friday, Chandler brought the papyrus rolls to Joseph Smith, at which time Joseph Smith and his scribes began to discuss seriously their significance.
7. WWPL, July 19–20, 1835, 554.
8. MHC, vol. B-1, 596; *HC*, 2:235.
9. “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” 235.
10. “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” 235; MHC, vol. B-1, 596; *HC*, 2:235.
11. For a discussion of the progress of work on the Rosetta Stone, see Todd, *Saga of the Book of Abraham*, 9.
12. This supposition was confirmed in *JSP*, D4:362–63, 363n10.

13. WWPL, July 19–20, 1835, 554.
14. MHC, vol. B-1, 596; HC, 2:236. Phelps likely contributed to this entry in the official history since he had worked alongside Willard Richards in Nauvoo when this portion of the history was recorded and also since he had been an eyewitness of these events.
15. “Book of John Whitmer,” 86.
16. “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” 236.
17. MHC, vol. B-1, 597; HC, 2:238.
18. Samuel Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 35, 35n29. Robin Scott Jensen makes a similar observation: “They [Smith and Phelps] believed the [Egyptian] language was mysterious, symbolic, and closely linked to Hebrew and other languages that reflected a more refined and ‘pure’ language.” Robin Scott Jensen, “The Joseph Smith Papers and the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Religious Education Review* (Winter 2017): 16.
19. I examined the microfilm version of the “Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language” in CHL (MS 1295) before the creation of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, which now presents this material in digitized photographic form on its official website. John Gee has posited that the Egyptian alphabet and grammar was actually transliterated in early 1836, not in the summer or fall of 1835. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 34–35; and John Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 427–48, especially 440–41.
20. Clark, *Story of the Pearl of Great Price*. A photo of the Egyptian alphabet and grammar journal is on p. 101.
21. MHC, vol. B-1, 597–600; HC, 2:239–42.
22. WWPL, September 11, 1835, 563.
23. JSP, J1:67; PJS, 2:45.
24. MHC, vol. B-1, 622; HC, 2:286.
25. JSP, J1:68; JSP, H1:98; PJS, 2:46.
26. JSP, J1:71; MHC, vol. B-1, 628; PJS, 2:50; HC, 2:289.
27. JSP, J1:72; MHC, vol. B-1, 629; PJS, 2:52; HC, 2:290.
28. JSP, J1:73; MHC, vol. B-1, 629; PJS, 2:53; HC, 2:290.
29. JSP, J1:76; MHC, vol. B-1, 630–31; PJS, 2:56; HC, 2:293.
30. WWPL, November 14, 1835, 568.
31. JSP, D5:51–53.
32. JSP, J1:105, 117, 120, 123–24, 147, 186; JSP, H1:129–30, 140, 143–44, 147, 170. Joseph Smith’s reference to translating the records is found in JSP, J1:109; JSP, H1:132.
33. JSP, D5:77 (information gathered from MB1, November 5, 1837).
34. MHC, vol. B-1, 794; PJS, 2:239; HC, 3:27.
35. MHC, vol. C-1, 1063; HC, 4:136.
36. MHC, vol. C-1, 1275; HC, 4:517.
37. JSP, J2:38.
38. JSP, J2:39; MHC, vol. C-2, 1276; HC, 4:519.
39. T&S 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704. The first installment of the Book of Abraham appeared in the same issue, on pages 703–6. The second installment of the Book of Abraham appeared in the March 15, 1842, issue, pages 719–22. The entire Book of Abraham also appears in the official *History of the Church*. See MHC, vol. C-1, 1277–80, 1287–94; HC, 4:520–34.

40. This document will appear in a forthcoming edition of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* but is currently available at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org>.
41. "Notice," *T&S* 4, no. 6 (February 1, 1843): 95.
42. *JSP*, J3:130; *HC*, 6:79.
43. "Kirtland Egyptian papers, circa 1835–1836," MS 1295, CHL. These papers have been reproduced digitally at <https://churchhistorycatalog.lds.org/>. See also <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/book-of-abraham-and-egyptian-material>.
44. *MHC*, vol. B-1, 597; *HC*, 2:238.
45. In July 2014, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued on its official website an article dealing with knotty historical and doctrinal issues. This article is entitled "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>. Regarding the translation process, the article admitted, "Many people saw the papyri, but no eyewitness account of the translation survives, making it impossible to reconstruct the process. Only small fragments of the long papyrus scrolls once in Joseph Smith's possession exist today. The relationship between those fragments and the text we have today is largely a matter of conjecture."
46. For example, Latter-day Saint scholar James R. Clark came to this conclusion in an earlier era. See his *Story of the Pearl of Great Price*, 102–7. See the recent evaluation in *JSP*, D5:75.
47. For a thorough retelling of what happened with the papyri following Joseph Smith's death and which of them are likely destroyed, see Christopher C. Smith, "'That Which Is Lost': Assessing the State of Preservation of the Joseph Smith Papyri," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 69–83. See also Todd, *Saga of the Book of Abraham*, 1–6; and *JSP*, D4:363n9.
48. Prime examples that seriously question Joseph Smith as a translator are Grant S. Heward and Jerald Tanner, "The Source of the Book of Abraham Identified," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1968): 92–98; Richard P. Howard, "The 'Book of Abraham' in the Light of History and Egyptology," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action* (April 1970): 38; Edward H. Ashment, "The Book of Abraham Facsimiles: A Reappraisal," *Sunstone* 4 (December 1979): 33–48; Charles M. Larson, *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992); Stephen E. Thompson, "Egyptology and the Book of Abraham," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 143–60; and Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development*, 2nd ed. (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1995), 192–210.

Examples that defend Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham are Hugh Nibley, "Taking Stock," *Improvement Era*, May 1970, 82–85, 91; Hugh Nibley, "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," *BYU Studies* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1971): 350–99; Hugh Nibley, "The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Response by H. W. Nibley to E. H. Ashment," *Sunstone* 4 (December 1979): 49–51; Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975); Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); Michael Dennis Rhodes, "A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 259–74; Michael D. Rhodes, "Why Doesn't the Translation of the Egyptian Papyri Found in 1967 Match the Text of the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price?," *Ensign*, July 1988, 51–53; Kirk Holland Vestal and Arthur Wallace, *The Firm Foundation of Mormonism* (Los Angeles: LL Company, 1981), 186–94; James R. Harris, *The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Study of the Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri* (Payson, UT: by the author, 1990); Karl C. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 17–37; Stanley B. Kimball, "New Light on Old Egyptian Mormon Mummies 1848–71," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 72–90; Brian M. Hauglid, *A Textual*

- History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2010), 152–81; John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 175–217; and Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*.
49. John Gee, “Horos Son of Osoroeris,” *Mélanges offerts à Ola el-Aguizy* (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 2015), 169–78; John Gee, “History of a Theban Priesthood,” in «Et maintenant ce ne sont plus que des villages . . .» *Thèbes et sa région aux époques hellénistique, romaine et byzantine. Actes du Colloque tenu à Bruxelles les 2 et 3 Décembre 2005*, ed. Alain Delattre and Paul Heilporn, *Papyrologica Bruxellensia* 34 (Brussels: Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2008), 59–71.
 50. “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” 234.
 51. John Gee has been a major proponent of this theory. In his recent book, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (p. 9), he states that the rediscovered papyri in 1967 “were not the portion of the papyri containing the Book of Abraham. In historical hindsight, however, they could not have been; the portion of the papyrus identified by nineteenth-century eyewitnesses as containing the Book of Abraham seems to have gone to Wood’s Museum and was presumably burned in the Chicago Fire of 1871. There is, at present, no way of recovering it.” See also pp. 84–85.
 52. WWJ, 2:155.
 53. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:225–26.
 54. In the church’s recent essay “Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham,” cited in footnote 45 above, these two “translation” possibilities are acknowledged: “It is likely futile to assess Joseph’s ability to translate papyri when we now have only a fraction of the papyri he had in his possession. Eyewitnesses spoke of ‘a long roll’ or multiple ‘rolls’ of papyrus. Since only fragments survive, it is likely that much of the papyri accessible to Joseph when he translated the book of Abraham is not among these fragments. The loss of a significant portion of the papyri means the relationship of the papyri to the published text cannot be settled conclusively by reference to the papyri.”
 55. See, for example, Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*; Rhodes, “Why Doesn’t the Translation of the Egyptian Papyri Found in 1967 Match the Text of the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price?,” 51–53; and Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 49–55, 97–105.
 56. Nibley, “The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” 359–99. See also Brian M. Hauglid, “Thoughts on the Book of Abraham,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 245–58.
 57. 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 (quotation from p. 53). See also JSP, D5:80–88.
 58. “The Answer,” *T&S* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1845): 758.
 59. See also Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 130–31.
 60. “Paracletes,” *T&S* 6, no. 8 (May 1, 1845): 891–92; and “The Paracletes. Continued,” *T&S* 6, no. 10 (June 1, 1845): 917–18.
 61. The modern hymn reads “God,” not “Gods.”
 62. “There is no End” is dedicated to Brigham Young in *Deseret News*, November 19, 1856, 290. A modernized version prepared for a specific tune is found in “If You Could Hie to Kolob,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 284.