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Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles

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One of the most difficult aspects of teaching the book of Abraham is dealing with the three facsimiles found there. Critics of the Church have raised numerous questions about them and the associated papyri, and students often ask about these criticisms. In this article, I will pass on my own experience gained while teaching about the facsimiles and the Pearl of Great Price at Brigham Young University.

Topics I cover when I teach the facsimiles include the history of the papyri, the questions critics have raised concerning the facsimiles and the papyri as they relate to the book of Abraham, answers to these criticisms, and the evidence that supports Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles.

History of the Papyri

The three facsimiles found in the book of Abraham all derive from ancient Egyptian papyri that Joseph Smith obtained in Kirtland in 1835. Sometime between 1818 and 1822, Antonio Lebolo, who was working as superintendent of the archaeological excavations for Bernardino Drovetti in upper Egypt, discovered many mummies in a tomb in Thebes. In 1822, Lebolo returned to his native town of Castellamonte in Italy, taking eleven of these mummies with him. Sometime between then and his death on 19 February 1830, he arranged with the Albano Oblasser Shipping Company in Trieste to sell the eleven mummies he had brought back from Egypt.^{clx1} The mummies were sent to New York, where Michael H. Chandler purchased them in 1833. When he

first obtained the mummies, Chandler, hoping to find something of value, unwrapped them and found several papyri in the mummy wrappings.^{clxi}2 For the next two years he traveled around the northeastern United States displaying the mummies and selling one now and then as the opportunity arose. In July 1835, Chandler arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, to display the mummies and papyri. At this point, he now had only four of the original eleven mummies he had purchased in New York. He met with Joseph Smith, who indicated interest in the papyri, and Chandler then decided to sell the remaining mummies and papyri to him. It was from these papyri that Joseph Smith translated the book of Abraham.

After Joseph Smith's death in 1844, the mummies and papyri remained in the possession of his mother, Lucy Smith, until her death on 14 May 1856. On 26 May, Emma Smith Bidamon, the remarried widow of Joseph Smith, sold them to Abel Combs.^{clxii}3 Soon thereafter Combs sold at least two of the mummies and several of the papyri to the St. Louis Museum.^{clxiii}4 In 1863, the St. Louis Museum closed and was moved to Chicago, Illinois.^{clxiv}5 The two mummies and some papyri remained on display in the museum until it was destroyed in the Chicago fire of 1871. For many years, it was assumed that all the papyri were destroyed in this fire. However, in 1966, Dr. Aziz Atiyah, a professor at the University of Utah, found eleven papyri fragments in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art that were clearly part of the papyri that Joseph Smith had in his possession. These papyri were donated to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1967^{clxv}6 and are now kept in the Church archives. The papyri fragments found in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art were purchased from the family of Alice Heusser, whose mother had been a nurse for Abel Combs before he died and to whom he had willed the papyri fragments on his death.^{clxvi}7

These papyri fragments came from three separate papyri rolls containing ancient Egyptian religious texts. The first is a Book of Breathings belonging to a man named Hor the son of Usirwer. There are also two copies of the Book of the Dead, one belonging to Tshemmin the daughter of Eshkons and the other to a women named Neferirnub. Although it was not found among the Metropolitan Museum of Art fragments, Joseph Smith also had a third Book of the Dead belonging to Amenhotep son of Tanub^{clxvii}8 and a document Egyptologists call a hypocephalus (facsimile 2) belonging to a man named Sheshonq. **Questions Raised by the Papyri**

These Egyptian documents can be reliably dated to somewhere between 220 and 150 b.c. on the basis of the handwriting, the historical period in which the religious writings on these papyri were in use in Egypt, and the historical references to at least one of the original owners of the papyri. They cannot possibly date to the period of Abraham—around 2000 to 1800 b.c. This seems to contradict the statement in the introduction to the book of Abraham that states it was “written by his own hand, upon papyrus.” Moreover, the writing on the surviving fragments can all be translated, and none of it mentions Abraham or seems to be related to the text of the book of Abraham.

Modern Egyptologists maintain that the facsimiles do not at all represent what Joseph Smith said they do. The original of facsimile 1 of the book of Abraham is found at the beginning of the Hor Book of Breathings papyrus, and the hieroglyphic writing on it associates the figure on the couch (figure 1) with Hor, the owner of the papyrus, who is portrayed as being resurrected by the god Anubis, who stands over him. Above and to the right of Anubis, Hor's soul is represented as a human-headed falcon. Facsimile 3, although not among the surviving fragments, also came from the same Book of Breathings, since the name Hor is found three times in the hieroglyphic writing on that facsimile. In this facsimile, Hor (figure 5), having been judged and found worthy, is

being ushered into the presence of Osiris (figure 1), the god of the dead, who is seated upon his throne. Behind Osiris is his wife/sister Isis (figure 2). Hor is being escorted by the god Anubis, guide of the dead (figure 6), and Ma'at, the goddess of truth (figure 4). Like facsimile 3, facsimile 2 is not found among the surviving fragments, but the writing on it indicates it belonged to a man named Sheshonq, and the hieroglyphic writing on it deals with Sheshonq's happiness and well-being in the Egyptian afterlife.

Resolution of the Problems

The statement in the introduction to the book of Abraham, that it was “written by his own hand upon papyrus,” does not necessarily mean that the papyrus Joseph Smith was translating was the original written by Abraham. The term “by the hand of” can simply mean that Abraham is the author of the book. In Hebrew, for example, *beyâd* means literally “by the hand of,” but simply designates the agent of an action, generally rendered in English with the preposition *by*. So while the papyri Joseph Smith had were written nearly two thousand years after Abraham, they nevertheless could have contained a *copy* of the book of Abraham, of which Abraham was the author. There are numerous examples of Egyptian papyri that have more than one text on them, and thus there could have been a copy of the Book of Abraham on the same papyrus as the Hor Book of Breathings.

What about the association of facsimiles 1 and 3 with the Hor Book of Breathings? The likely explanation here is that the original illustrations done by Abraham had been modified and adapted for use by Hor, the owner of the papyrus. What Joseph Smith did with the facsimiles is similar to what he did with the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible—he gave the original meaning of the Abraham illustrations, correcting the distortions that had taken place over nearly two millennia. The same, of course, holds true for facsimile 2.

But is there any evidence that, even in distorted form, these illustrations were associated with Abraham anciently? There is indeed. I will discuss each facsimile in turn.

Facsimile 1. In an ancient Egyptian papyrus dating to roughly the first or second century a.d., there is a lion-couch scene similar to the one shown in facsimile 1. Underneath the illustration, the text reads “Abraham, who upon. . . .”^{clxviii}9 There is a break in the text here, so we do not know what word followed. The key point, however, is that an ancient Egyptian document, from approximately the same time period as the papyri Joseph Smith had in his possession, associated Abraham with a lion-couch scene.

Facsimile 2. Egyptologists call documents like facsimile 2 a *hypocephalus*, Greek for “under the head,” since the document was placed under the head of the deceased in the coffin. Over a hundred examples of them are located in museums around the world.

On an Egyptian papyrus of the early Christian period is the phrase “Abraham, the pupil of the eye of the Wedjat.”^{clxix}10 In the 162d chapter of the Book of the Dead, which tells how to make a *hypocephalus*, the Wedjat eye is described, and the *hypocephalus* itself is called an “eye.”^{clxx}11 The Apocalypse of Abraham, a pseudepigraphical text dating from the early Christian era, describes a vision Abraham saw while making a sacrifice to God. In this vision, he is shown the plan of the universe, “what is in the heavens, on the earth, in the sea, in the abyss, and in the lower depths.”^{clxxi}12 This language is very close to the phrase found in facsimile 2 (figures 9, 10, and 11), which reads, “O Mighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, of the hereafter, and of his great waters.”^{clxxii}13 In this same text, Abraham sees “the fullness of the universe and its circles in all”^{clxxiii}14 and a “picture of creation” with two sides.^{clxxiv}15 The similarity with the *hypocephalus*, which for the Egyptians represents the whole of the world in a circular format, is striking. There is even a description of what are clearly the four figures labeled number 6 in the

Joseph Smith *hypocephalus*.^{clxxv} 16 It also tells how Abraham is promised the priesthood, which will continue in his posterity—a promise associated with the temple.^{clxxvi} 17 He is shown the “host of stars, and the orders they were commanded to carry out, and the elements of the earth obeying them.”^{clxxvii} 18 This language shows a remarkable parallel to the wording in the book of Abraham.

Facsimile 3. In the Testament of Abraham, another pseudepigraphical text of the early Christian era, Abraham sees a vision of the Last Judgment that is unquestionably related to the judgment scene pictured in the 125th chapter of the Book of the Dead, thus clearly associating Abraham with this ancient Egyptian work.^{clxxviii} 19 One of the Joseph Smith papyri is, in fact, a drawing of this judgment scene from the 125th chapter of the Book of the Dead, and facsimile 3 is a scene closely related to this.

The important point here is that we find ancient Near Eastern documents that are roughly contemporary with the *hypocephalus* and the other Egyptian papyri purchased by Joseph Smith that relate the scenes portrayed in facsimiles 1, 2, and 3 with Abraham, just as Joseph Smith said. Significantly, none of these documents had even been discovered at Joseph Smith’s time.

Joseph Smith’s Interpretations of the Facsimiles

What about Joseph Smith’s interpretations of the three facsimiles? Are they valid? Do they make sense? As we look at evidence in support of Joseph Smith’s explanations of the three facsimiles of the book of Abraham, it is important to recognize that whenever we do find a piece of evidence supporting Joseph Smith’s explanations, this must carry a great deal of weight, since the (secular) probability of the evidence being correct is much smaller than that of being wrong. This is something we all know from experience in trying to answer a multiple-choice question when we do not know the correct answer. If Joseph Smith explained one thing correctly, this could be attributed to chance, but when we find many examples of his explanations being correct, for all practical purposes, this eliminates chance or “good guessing.”

It is also important to remember that we do not have the original illustrations made by Abraham; rather, we have copies made nearly two thousand years later, with the consequent problems of changes and distortions. With these things in mind, let us again look at each facsimile. This will not be a complete discussion of each facsimile but rather an attempt to highlight some of the most notable examples of Joseph Smith getting things right in his interpretations of the facsimiles.

^{clxxix} *Facsimile 1*. The most important correlation, of course, is one already mentioned above—that another ancient Egyptian text dating from approximately the same time as the Joseph Smith papyri associates Abraham with a lion-couch scene. Critics have maintained that facsimile 1 portrays an embalming or resurrection scene, not a sacrifice. And indeed, in its present form, it does represent the resurrection of Hor, the original owner of the Book of Breathings papyrus. There are, however, some peculiar and unique aspects to the illustration. In all known ancient Egyptian examples of a resurrection scene, the figure on the lion couch has his legs spread, as in facsimile 1, but is wearing no clothing (for the Egyptians, resurrection was a rebirth; and when we are born, we have no clothes on). The figure in a resurrection scene also has only one arm raised, while the other is at his side. Facsimile 1 is unique in that the figure is clothed and has both hands raised in the classical Egyptian gesture of prayer—certainly a carryover from the original illustration by Abraham where he was praying.

Another criticism leveled against the interpretations of facsimile 1 is that the standing figure is not a priest but is, in fact, the Egyptian god Anubis. As represented on the papyrus, the figure is indeed Anubis. However, there are examples from Egypt of priests wearing masks of gods when

carrying out their priestly duties. John Gee's book on the Joseph Smith papyri shows an example of an Egyptian priest wearing a mask of Anubis as well as an actual mask of Anubis found by archaeologists.^{clxxx20}

lots in this paragraph The names of the idolatrous gods mentioned in facsimile 1 provide another example of the validity of the Prophet Joseph's explanations. If Joseph Smith had simply made up the names, the chances of their corresponding to the names of ancient deities would be astronomically small. The name *Elkenah*, for example, is clearly related to the Hebrew *el qanah/ qo³neh* "God has created / the creator." *Elkenah* is found in the Old Testament as the name of several people, including Samuel's father (see 1 Samuel 1:1). The name is also found as a divine name in Mesopotamian sources as *dIl-gi-na / dIl-kí-na / dÉl-ké-na*.^{clxxx1} *Libnah* may be related to the Hebrew *lebanah* "moon" (see Isaiah 24:23) from the root *laban* "white." A city captured by Joshua was called *libnah* (see Josuah 10:29). The name *Korash* is found as a name in Egyptian sources.^{clxxxii} A connection with *Kores*, the name of the Persian king Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28), is also possible. *Facsimile 2*.^{clxxxiii} In conjunction with facsimile 2, which Joseph Smith indicates contains astronomical concepts among other things, it is noteworthy that the ancient Jewish historian Josephus states that Abraham taught the Egyptians astronomy.^{clxxxiv} In the explanation to figure 1, Joseph Smith says that this is "Kolob, signifying the first creation, nearest to the celestial, or the residence of God." The word *Kolob* is particularly interesting. There is a common Semitic root *QLB/QRB* that has the basic meaning of "heart, center, middle" and "to be near." For example, the Arabic *qalb* means "heart, middle, center"; the Hebrew *qereb* means "middle, midst"; and the Hebrew *qarab* means "to be near." In Arabic, the word *qalb* forms part of the Arabic names of several of the brightest stars in the sky, including Antares, Regulus (Arabic *qalb 'al- 'asad*, "heart of the lion"; Regulus is the brightest star in the constellation Leo the Lion), and Canopus.

Also in the explanation to figure 1, Joseph says that the earth is called *Jah-oh-eh* by the Egyptians. This is the only place in the book of Abraham where he gives an actual translation of an Egyptian word. The Egyptian word for "earth, ground, field" is *zzz*. In Egyptian, only the consonants were written, so we do not know what the vowels were. However, Coptic, the latest stage of Egyptian, used a modified Greek alphabet that included vowels. In Coptic, this word is *yh*, pronounced *yh* "y-he."^{clxxxv} If we assume that Joseph Smith is using the biblical convention of rendering a Semitic "y" as an English "j," this matches up quite closely. One more example—Joseph Smith says that the four standing figures of figure 6 represent "this earth in its four quarters." For the Egyptians, these were the four sons of Horus, who, among other things, were the gods of the four cardinal points of the compass.^{clxxxvi}

Facsimile 3. With facsimile 3, as with the other two facsimiles, it is important to keep in mind that the interpretation given by Joseph Smith is for the original illustration made by Abraham, which is different than the form we now have. Some of the most obvious interpretations are the designation of the female (figures 2 and 4) as the pharaoh and prince of pharaoh. If we had the original drawn by Abraham, the figures would have matched the Prophet Joseph's explanation.

Summary

While critics of the Church often target the facsimiles of the book of Abraham in their attempts to disprove the Prophet Joseph Smith, in this paper I have shown that Joseph Smith correctly interpreted items found on the three facsimiles of the book of Abraham and that ancient sources also associated Abraham with all of these illustrations. It is especially important to recognize that knowledge of these Egyptian matters was unavailable even to the best scholars of Joseph Smith's

day. This only reaffirms what every honest person can learn in earnest prayer, that Joseph Smith was truly a prophet of God and that he received these things through revelation.

Notes

1. H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 83.
2. Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 88.
3. Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 203.
4. Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 209.
5. Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 212.
6. Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 236.
7. Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 243–47.
8. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 10–11.
9. Janet H. Johnson, “The Demotic Magical Spells of Leiden I 384,” in *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden to Leiden* 56 (1975), column 8, line 6.
10. Francis Llewellyn Griffith and Herbert Thompson, eds., *Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden* (London: H. Grevel and Co., 1904), column 8, line 8, 64–65.
11. Richard Lepsius, ed., *Das Todtenbuch der Agypter nach dem hieroglyphischen Papyrus in Turin* (Leipzig: Georg Wigand, 1842), pl. LXXVII.
12. Apocalypse of Abraham 12. For an English translation, see James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1983), 1:695.
13. Translation by author.
14. Apocalypse of Abraham, 12; Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 1:695.
15. Apocalypse of Abraham, 21; Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 1:699–700.
16. Apocalypse of Abraham, 18; Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 1:698.
17. Apocalypse of Abraham, 25; Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 1:698.
18. Apocalypse of Abraham, 19; Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 1:701–2.
19. Testament of Abraham, recension A, 12–13; Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 1:889–90.
20. Gee, *Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 36.
21. Anton Deimel, ed., *Pantheon Babylonicum*, Sumerisches Lexikon, part 4, vol. 1 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1950), 48.
22. John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, “Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study,” in *Historicity and the Latter-Day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 2001), 75, 110n.
23. For a more detailed look at facsimile 2, see Michael D. Rhodes, *The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Seventeen Years Later* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1994).
24. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.8.2.
25. *A Coptic Dictionary*, comp. Walter E. Crum (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 89.
26. Bonnet, *Reallexikon*, 315–16; *LdÄ*, 3:53. For an in-depth study of the four sons of Horus, see John Gee, *Notes on the Sons of Horus* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991).