

“THE WORK OF TRANSLATING”

The Book of Abraham’s Translation Chronology¹

Kerry Muhlestein and Megan Hansen

One of Joseph Smith’s great gifts was translation. While millions have benefitted from his translation efforts, we understand very little of the process. This is particularly true of the Book of Abraham. Here we will investigate how much of the Book of Abraham was translated in Kirtland and how much in Nauvoo. Understanding this chronology will allow us to better perceive doctrinal developments within the Church and to more fully understand Joseph Smith’s revelatory process.

We wish to note at the outset that we have not been able to reach a firm conclusion about this chronology. There are scholars who feel strongly about various possible timelines, and initially we were among these. We expected that the evidence would allow us to make a firm conclusion. Yet, as we followed the evidence, it became clear that the evidence is ambiguous. It may be stronger for one theory than others, but not enough to end debate. Therefore, we do not take a stand that is stronger than the evidence allows, but rather acknowledge that sometimes historical information forces us to live with a degree of ambiguity.

EARLY TRANSLATION EFFORTS

On July 3, 1835, Michael Chandler arrived in Kirtland with four mummies and several pieces of papyrus, including two scrolls. Chandler invited Joseph Smith to examine the artifacts, which Joseph did the next morning; Chandler then allowed him to take the papyri home for a more thorough examination.² Joseph apparently completed some translation by Sunday, July 5, because on that day Oliver Cowdery read to Chandler from some leaves the Prophet had translated.³ Joseph Smith felt they needed to acquire the papyri, so he raised \$2,400 for the purchase.⁴ He immediately began translation. About this time they learned the papyri contained records of Abraham and Joseph of Egypt.⁵ If it was not until after they acquired the papyri that they made this discovery, it is not clear what Joseph translated on July 4 or 5 that convinced him to purchase the papyri. It seems more likely that they discovered this before purchasing the papyri and that the date for discovering it was misremembered when making later historical notes.

Assisted by his companions, the Prophet spent the rest of July “translating an alphabet of the Book of Abraham and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language.”⁶ It is difficult to tell how much of the Book of Abraham itself was translated during that month. We have no record of translation in August or September. Moreover, Joseph spent much of August traveling to Michigan, and he spent a week in September at a Church conference in Portage, Ohio. William W. Phelps also noted in mid-September that they had not translated recently.⁷ All of this suggests that the papyri lay virtually untouched during August and September.

That changed on October 1, when Smith, Phelps, and Cowdery were working on an Egyptian alphabet, and “the system of astronomy was unfolded” to them.⁸ On October 7, Joseph “recommenced translating the ancient records.”⁹ The most intense period of translation, however, apparently occurred in November. On both November 19 and 20, Joseph “spent the day in translating the Egyptian records,”¹⁰ making “rapid progress.”¹¹ On November 24, Joseph translated in the afternoon,¹² and the following day he spent the whole day translating.¹³ On November 26, Joseph’s journal included this entry: “We spent the day in transcribing Egyptian characters from the papyrus.”¹⁴ In December, the study of Hebrew suddenly eclipsed

any efforts to translate from the papyri or work on an Egyptian grammar. Thereafter, we have no record of translating from the papyri until 1842.

LATER TRANSLATION EFFORTS

The Prophet retained an interest in the translation between 1835 and 1842, despite apparently not actively translating. In December of 1835, he noted that he was preparing a room for translation near the place he intended to store and display the papyri.¹⁵ Nearly two years later the Kirtland high council received a request to appoint Willard Richards and Reuben Hedlock to assist in translating and printing the papyri.¹⁶ While the motion was approved, the result was not realized for several years. Soon after this vote the antiquities were hidden and then secreted away to Far West, Missouri, because someone attempted to steal the mummies. Joseph Smith's incarceration in Missouri—from late 1838 to early 1839—forestalled continued translation. Only after he was freed, helped establish a new city in Illinois, and obtained a measure of peace would he again take up the Book of Abraham translation.

In mid-1840, Joseph again brought up translation with a high council, this time in Nauvoo, asking to be relieved from meeting his temporal needs so he could “commence the work of translating the Egyptian records.”¹⁷ Just over a year later, Joseph instructed the Quorum of the Twelve to take over more of the affairs of the kingdom so he could attend to the “business of translating.”¹⁸

It was not until early 1842 that efforts to publish the Book of Abraham began to bear fruit. Under the direction of Brigham Young, a call was issued to Church members asking them to pay their tithes so Joseph might have time to publish his translation of the Bible and the “record of Father Abraham.”¹⁹

About this same time Joseph Smith took over editorship of the *Times and Seasons*. He intended to use this venue to publish the Book of Abraham in the March 1, 1842, edition, the first over which he would have full editorial control.²⁰ Thus, on February 23 and March 1, he worked with Reuben Hedlock to create the carving for Facsimile 1.²¹ The March 1 edition of *Times and Seasons* contained Facsimile 1 and Abraham 1:1–2:18.

Joseph and his coeditors immediately began to prepare a second installment of the Book of Abraham. On March 4, the Prophet collaborated with Hedlock on the carving for Facsimile 2.²² On March 8, the Prophet “Commenced Translating from the Book of Abraham, for the 10 No of the Times and seasons.”²³ On the next day Joseph continued translating.²⁴

On March 15, Facsimile 2 and additional text from the Book of Abraham were printed in *Times and Seasons*. On May 1, Facsimile 3 was printed. Although there were plans to publish more of the Book of Abraham,²⁵ that never happened.

WHAT WAS TRANSLATED WHEN?

The question remains open as to how much of the Book of Abraham Joseph translated by the end of 1835 and whether he translated a significant amount in 1842 while preparing the manuscripts. The earliest attested manuscripts of the Book of Abraham, however, make this question quite difficult to answer. Three manuscripts created in 1835 still survive, along with one that was begun in 1835 but finished in 1842.²⁶ None are the original translation manuscript, none are the same, and none of the 1835 documents go past Abraham 2:18.²⁷ Because the first *Times and Seasons* installment only published through Abraham 2:18, and because the Prophet’s journal says he engaged in translation on two days between that installment and the second, it can be argued that Joseph Smith only translated up through Abraham 2:18 by the first publication and spent two days frantically translating in order to publish Abraham 2:19–5:21 in the next edition of the newspaper. This hypothesis explains why the ending points in one of the 1835 manuscripts and the 1842 first installment of publication match. This is fairly convincing, yet poses a few problems.

First, this hypothesis is based on an argument of silence. It is not clear what the 1835 manuscripts represent. That none are identical suggests that none of them represent a complete copy of what Joseph translated to that point. One contains a translation up to verse 18 of chapter 2, but the others do not make it that far. If we had not found the former manuscript, would we be justified in suggesting that Joseph translated only through Abraham 2:6 (the furthest verse present in the other 1835

manuscripts) and quickly translated verses 7–18 just before publishing the March 1 edition of the *Times and Seasons*? Clearly that suggestion would be incorrect, but we know that only because we found another manuscript showing otherwise.

A second problem with this argument lies in the amount of material translated. The latter part of 1835 was clearly the most intense time for translating the Book of Abraham, both in terms of time spent translating and in terms of how much the antiquities seemed to occupy the Prophet's thoughts and journal entries. While we cannot tell how much time was spent translating in July, we know of at least three days wherein he did some translating (it was likely more), and if we count the day that the "principles of astronomy were unfolded," as well as the other days we know he spent on translating, Joseph spent at least eight and a half days translating in the latter half of 1835. If we were to suppose that he translated from Abraham 1:1 through Abraham 2:18 during that time, that would mean that he translated 49 verses, or 2,149 words, averaging almost 6 verses or 253 words a day.²⁸

In contrast, with much fuller journal coverage for the first part of 1842, there are only one and a half days where Joseph Smith noted that he was translating. Because of the fairly robust journals from those months and since the March 8 entry notes that he "commenced" translating,²⁹ we can be reasonably sure he did not do any translating before this; moreover, given the journal notations afterwards, we can also be fairly sure he did not translate anything afterwards. If we were to suppose that on these days he translated Abraham 2:19–5:21, then during that day and a half he translated 88 verses, or 3,340 words, averaging just over 58 verses or 2,226 words a day. This would suggest he translated about 9 times faster in 1842 than 1835. This seems unlikely. Yet, because all things are possible with God and because it is worthwhile to more fully develop a picture of Joseph's translation efforts, we will examine other kinds of evidence.

Sometime before September 29, 1835, Oliver Cowdery recorded, "We diligently sought for the right of the fathers, and the authority of the holy priesthood, and the power to administer the same; for we desired to be followers of righteousness, and in the possession of greater knowledge, even the knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God."³⁰ The language

clearly draws from the first few verses of the Book of Abraham. Because no translation was performed in August and September, this indicates that at least some was performed in July.

Similarly, between 1835 and 1842, a number of writings mention topics that seem to arise from the text of Abraham 3–5. Because no translation activity seems to have taken place between December 1835 and March 1842, any evidence of material from Abraham 3–5 between those dates suggests that Joseph translated those chapters in 1835.

For example, in the “Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language” (GAEL), which seems to have been created during the latter half of 1835, appears the line “The first Being—supreme intelligence.”³¹ This is evocative of the language in Abraham 3:19. This does not necessitate that Abraham 3:19 had been translated by the time GAEL 3 was created,³² but it strongly suggests it. Likewise, a few pages later in the grammar a discussion of Abraham being foreordained and chosen to go to Egypt to preach the gospel appears.³³ These are concepts found only in Abraham 3, again strongly suggesting the translation had proceeded at least that far before the end of 1835. These last two attestations are important because, unlike many other references to astronomy that could come from either Facsimile 2 or Abraham 3, these two phrases appear only in Abraham 3. This strengthens the likelihood that other astronomical references were linked to Abraham 3, again indicating that the translation had reached that stage by the end of 1835.

Similarly, the word “Shinehah” is attested in Abraham 3:13, where it is part of the astronomical explanation given there.³⁴ However, in section 86 of the 1835 edition of Doctrine and Covenants,³⁵ the word “Shinehah” is used as a code for “Kirtland.”³⁶ This happens again in the heading of section 96,³⁷ as well as three times in section 98.³⁸ While it is possible that this was a code word that Joseph randomly created and then later inserted into Abraham 3, it seems more likely that he translated through Abraham 3 and then borrowed a word from that text. If this assumption is correct, then, again, Joseph had translated Abraham 3 before the end of 1835.

As mentioned above, in early October the principles of astronomy were unfolded to Smith and others while working on a grammar.³⁹ We cannot be certain this is tied directly to any text from the Book of Abraham,

but it seems most likely that either an understanding of Facsimile 2 or a translation of Abraham 3 was provided at this time. Given the references to chapter 3 in the Grammar, that text is the likely referent. Further evidence strengthens this supposition, as is evident when we examine the principles of astronomy outlined in Abraham 3 and alluded to in Facsimile 2, which were frequently employed by Joseph in following years.

As a case in point, when Wilford Woodruff was set apart as a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, he was told “that [he] should visit COLUB.”⁴⁰ Later, in December of 1838, Woodruff again spoke of “COLOB.”⁴¹ Both of these journal entries make it clear that Joseph’s colleagues were familiar with Kolob. Given the paucity of other or earlier references to Kolob in the documentary record, these mentions in Woodruff’s journal likely serve as evidence of familiarity with Facsimile 2 or Abraham 3, indicating that knowledge of Kolob arose in 1835.

A similar example comes from a May 6, 1838, record of a Joseph Smith sermon: “This day, President Smith. delivered a discourse. to the people. . . . He also instructed the Church, in the mistories of the Kingdom of God; giving them a history of the Plannets &c. and of Abrahams writings upon the Plannetary system &c.”⁴² The specific phrase “writings upon the Planetary system” strongly suggests that the Prophet was preaching about Abraham 3; nothing else in his revelations match that description. Despite this language, the entry could be referring to Joseph’s understanding of Facsimile 2. It may also be that while looking at the papyri the Prophet received clear enough impressions about what the Book of Abraham contained that he could preach about text he had not yet actually translated. Still, the most straightforward reading of this journal entry is that Joseph Smith had read Abraham’s writings about astronomy. Only Abraham 3 fits this description. Because this is the most straightforward reading, it should be assumed that Joseph translated Abraham 3 during 1835.

During the Prophet’s 1839 imprisonment in Liberty Jail, he wrote an “Epistle to the Church” wherein he employed language found in the Book of Abraham. Part of his letter describes:

a time to come, in the which nothing shall be withheld whether there be one God or many Gods they shall be manifest all thrones and dominions, principalities and powers, shall be revealed and set

“THE WORK OF TRANSLATING”

forth upon all who have endured valiantly for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and also if there be bounds set to the Heavens, or to the Seas, or to the Dry Land, or to the Sun Moon or Stars, all the times of their revolutions, all the appointed days, months and years, and all the days of their days, months and years, and all their glories, laws, and set times shall be revealed in the days of the dispensation of the fulness of times according to that which was ordained in the midst of the Council of the Eternal God of all other Gods, before this world was.⁴³

The above references to multiple Gods could reflect the use of the term “gods” in Abraham 4, a concept that will be discussed further below. The word “revolutions” used in reference to astronomical bodies occurs in the scriptures only in Abraham 3:4 and in D&C 121. While not unique to the Book of Abraham, the use of the word “appointed” when referring to time occurs in Abraham 3:4.⁴⁴ The phrase “set times” (or slight variations of it) occurs in Abraham 3:6, 7, and 10.⁴⁵ The final reference in this paragraph of the letter that seems to refer to the Book of Abraham is the mention of “the Council of the Eternal God of all other Gods, before this world was.” Abraham 3:22–28 describes the council held in the premortal existence. Abraham 4 and 5 further discuss a multiplicity of gods being part of creation. Although many of these phrases are found throughout the scriptures, the use of all of them together in one paragraph seems to link this excerpt with the last three chapters of the Book of Abraham.

A similar possibility is attested in Joseph Smith’s teachings from January of 1841, when he taught that the phrase “‘without form and void’ was better translated ‘empty and desolate.’ The word ‘created’ should be ‘formed and organized’. . . . Spirits are eternal.”⁴⁶ While this language evokes that of Abraham 4:1–2, it may be that the Prophet’s study of Hebrew evoked both (as further discussed below). This same sermon continues to discuss elements of a premortal council that are similar to Abraham 3:27–28, which is not associated with the Prophet’s Hebrew studies. The idea of a premortal council is present in earlier revelations, such as the Book of Moses, but the language in the sermon is more similar to Abraham 3, again suggesting an 1835 translation of Abraham 3.⁴⁷

HAD THEY TRANSLATED BEYOND WHAT WE NOW HAVE?

While our examination thus far suggests that by the end of 1835 Joseph translated through Abraham 5—everything we have in the current text of the Book of Abraham—there is some evidence suggesting he translated even further. For example, Anson Call saw the Book of Abraham manuscript arrive in Far West in 1838 and helped take it to the Prophet's office, where the Prophet said, "Sit down and we will read to you from the translations of the Book of Abraham' Oliver Cowdery then read until he was tired when Thomas Marsh read making altogether about two hours."⁴⁸ The current text of the Book of Abraham can be easily read aloud in under half an hour. Even if half of the "reading" was really discussion, it would still imply that by 1838 they already had twice as much of the Book of Abraham as we now have. Yet Call's wording indicates they did not discuss but actually read from the text the entire time—connoting that they had already translated four times as much as we now have.

Of course, we must be careful in using sources created some time after the event, and we cannot be certain Call was fully accurate in knowing how long the reading lasted. His writing seems to have taken place sometime afterwards, yet his ability to give a precise date suggests he was consulting a diary. The accuracy of the account is questioned by the claim that Oliver Cowdery was part of the group present. Cowdery had been excommunicated some months earlier and was not in Far West at this date. Yet, while Call may have misremembered who did the reading, it is still likely that he accurately recalled that the reading took more than an hour. This source strongly suggests that the Book of Abraham had been translated beyond Abraham 5 before the end of 1835. It would take fairly strong evidence to discard this historical source, as problematic as it is.

Before the end of 1835, Oliver Cowdery wrote a description of the papyri, mentioning that it seemed to contain information about the Creation and the Fall.⁴⁹ The current Book of Abraham does not contain material about the Fall. While it could be assumed this means they had already translated up to Abraham 5 and beyond, it is also quite possible that Cowdery was either recording their impressions of what they would eventually translate or

his impressions of the meaning of the drawings on the papyri. Because he also wrote that some of those drawings were about the Fall, the latter seems quite likely.

Within the next few years, William West visited Kirtland, saw the mummies and papyri, and wrote of the experience in an anti-Mormon pamphlet, which he published in 1837. He wrote, “The records are those of Abraham and Joseph, and contain important information respecting the creation, the fall of man, the deluge, the Patriarchs, the book of Mormon, the lost tribes, the gathering, the end of the world, the judgment, &c. &c. This is as near as I can recollect; if there is an error I hope some of the Mormons will point it out, and I will recall it.”⁵⁰ West is explicit that he was not absolutely sure if he remembered the topics covered in the papyri correctly. Yet, if he was correct, he was at least told the papyri contained a creation account, such as is found in Abraham 4 and 5, as well as information about things not mentioned in the current Book of Abraham, such as the deluge and lost tribes. Even if West recalled correctly and if he had been told accurately what Joseph Smith had said were in the papyri, this could merely represent the impressions of the Prophet regarding what was in the papyri as opposed to his having specifically translated passages about those topics. The same is true of other accounts that mention the papyri containing accounts of topics not in the published version of the Book of Abraham, such as Albert Brown’s recollection that the writings of Jacob were on the papyri,⁵¹ William Appleby’s account of the Fall and Creation,⁵² or Josiah Quincy’s recollection of the writings of Moses and Aaron being on the papyri.⁵³ Even if we should accept the accuracy of all of these accounts without question, which does not seem reasonable, they do not demonstrate anything beyond an impression of what could be on the papyri.

The evidence considered thus far is mixed. Most of it could be taken to mean that all of the current Book of Abraham, and perhaps more, was translated before 1835. Some of the evidence examined makes this same suggestion somewhat strongly and requires intentionally understanding the evidence differently than its most obvious reading in order to avoid such a conclusion. Now let us look at information that may give cause to read these documents differently.

EVIDENCE FOR AN 1842 TRANSLATION OF ABRAHAM 3–5

Besides the weak evidence that the 1835 Book of Abraham manuscripts contain material only up through Abraham 2:18, there is some additional evidence that may indicate Abraham 3–5 was not yet translated in 1835. We must also examine the recorded events during the 1842 publication of the Book of Abraham and analyze the influence Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew had on that publication.

As was noted above, the first *Times and Seasons* installment of the Book of Abraham published the same material present in one of the four earliest manuscripts. The precision of that break, at Abraham 2:18, seems to go beyond coincidence. Furthermore, the Prophet's journal does not record him "translating" in preparation for that first publication, but it does record him doing so for a day and a half before the next installment. No further mention of translation occurs, and even though another facsimile was later published, no further publication of the text took place either. One would think that if more of the text had been translated it would have been published alongside Facsimile 3. Clearly there was a desire to publish more, and obviously the paper had the time and capacity to do so. The story that most easily explains those historical facts could be hypothesized thus: as Joseph was eager to publish from the Book of Abraham in his first full edition as editor of the *Times and Seasons*, he quickly published up through Abraham 2:18, which was all that he had translated up to that point. Still eager to publish more of the ancient record, he spent more time frantically translating, and in the next edition of the paper he published the new material he had translated during those few days. While wanting to translate more, he did not, and thus he half-heartedly kept up with his desire by publishing another facsimile and its explanation. A year later the paper promised that he intended to publish more, but because he never translated more, further publications didn't occur.

While we have no way of verifying that narrative, it does fit many of the facts well. On the other hand, it is reasonable to suppose that when Joseph said he was "translating" between the first and second installments of publication, he was actually revising. We know that the Prophet did make inspired revisions in most, if not all, of his other revelations. Calling

these changes “translation” is perfectly in keeping with his broader translation and publication patterns. Yet such a scenario fails to explain why the break after the first installment matches so well the break in one of the 1835 manuscripts or why no more of the Book of Abraham was published, either along with Facsimile 3 or at any point thereafter.

Further evidence comes from examining Hebrew aspects of the Book of Abraham. Chapter 3 is full of Hebrew transliterations that match perfectly with the Hebrew grammar, lexicon, and lessons that Joseph began after he stopped translating Egyptian at the end of 1835. For example, transliterations such as “Kokob” and “Kokaubeam” are clearly influenced by the Hebrew grammars Smith was studying.⁵⁴ On the surface, this suggests Joseph translated these phrases after he began his study of Hebrew and that his transliterations were influenced by his grammar book. Yet it seems equally as likely that these are glosses, the “translation” efforts of 1842 were actually Joseph editing translated text and that this editing included inserting newly acquired Hebrew phrases.⁵⁵

The influence of Joseph’s grammar, authored by Rabbi Seixas, is also evident in the creation account portrayed in Abraham 4 and 5. Phrases like “organized and formed” (Abraham 4:1) instead of “created,”⁵⁶ “expanse,” instead of “firmament,”⁵⁷ “heavens” (Abraham 4:1) instead of “heaven,”⁵⁸ and “empty and desolate” (Abraham 4:2) as opposed to “without form and void”⁵⁹ are all phrases Joseph likely picked up from his Hebrew study and some of which he referenced elsewhere. Even an apparent use of the Hebrew *hiphil* verb form is present in Abraham 4:4. Various words and phrases which were clearly influenced by Joseph Smith’s Hebrew studies are used throughout the entire narrative of chapters 4 and 5.⁶⁰ The same is true of representing creation being brought about by “gods” instead of “God,” something that Joseph Smith argued could be demonstrated in the Hebrew name for God.⁶¹ These elements are so thoroughly interwoven in the text of Abraham 4 and 5 that it is difficult to imagine them as glosses. Rather, they seem to represent integral features of the text. This is fairly convincing evidence that at least Abraham 4 and 5 were translated after 1835.

There is another issue to consider here. While phrases such as “organize” and “desolate” seem to argue for the influence of the Prophet’s study of

Hebrew, his use of “gods” throughout chapters 4 and 5 may actually argue against it. This bears further examination.

While it is true that *Elohim* is a plural form of the word for “god” in Hebrew, it is not the standard plural form, which would be *elim*. It is almost certainly during his study of Hebrew at the end of 1835 and the beginning of 1836 that Joseph first saw any linguistic evidence in Hebrew that supported the notion of a plurality of gods. Yet the way he would have encountered this does not seem like it would have propelled him towards that interpretation. The word *Elohim* first appears in the Seixas grammar on page 34, but there it is only mentioned; it is not explained at all. On page 85 the explanation for this word is “God; a sing. noun with a plur. form.”⁶² It then refers the reader to *Elo’ah* in the lexicon. The lexicon referred to is the Gibbs lexicon, which contains a definition for *Elo’ah* on page 12. Under that entry is a subentry on *Elohim*: “A god, by way of eminence, the true God, Jehovah. (1) as the ordinary plural, gods; also spoken of kings, princes, magistrates, or judges, and perhaps angels.” The definition speaks of the word being applied to gods, but “preeminently to the true God, Jehovah, also a godlike form or apparition. This *pluralis excellentiae* is generally construed with singular adjectives and verbs, but there are many exceptions.”⁶³ Both of these definitions certainly leave open the possibility of a plural interpretation of the word, but they are both clear that it is not normally to be interpreted that way, and grammatically it does not normally function that way. In other words, they teach that, unless there is a reason to do so, the word should be construed as singular. Similarly, the other grammar Joseph had access to defined the word thus: “For the sake of emphasis, the Hebrews commonly employed most of the words which signify Lord, God, etc. in the plur. form, but with the sense of the singular. This is called *pluralis excellentiae*.”⁶⁴

While we cannot read Joseph’s mind, he likely would have taken these entries at face value without an *a priori* reason to do otherwise, meaning that unless something he already encountered caused him to disagree, Joseph would probably rely on what these three publications said, and take *Elohim* as used in Genesis 1, which is paired with a singular verb, suggesting a singular noun in a majestic form. Yet he did not do so and in fact argued with his Jewish Hebrew teacher, whom he greatly respected, about this very

point. Years later he would say, “I once asked a learned Jew, ‘If the Hebrew language compels us to render all words ending in *heim* in the plural, why not render the first *Eloheim* plural?’ He replied, ‘That is the rule with few exceptions; but in this case it would ruin the Bible.’ He acknowledged I was right.”⁶⁵ The Prophet is probably referring to Rabbi Seixas, with whom he was studying Hebrew, who, it seems, when pressed by Joseph, acknowledged that the noun was plural, but did not agree with translating it that way. The Prophet would probably not have disagreed with his respected teacher, his teacher’s grammar book, and the other Hebrew books he was using, if he had not already come to believe that there was more than one god at work in the creation story.

Clearly Joseph Smith already knew that God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, were two separate beings. Visions had made that clear to him, and he had spoken of it before. Yet nothing he saw, revealed, or taught before 1835 would have pushed him so forcefully towards the idea that there was a plurality of gods acting in the creation. By far the most likely explanation for his determination to use his nascent Hebrew skills to say there were multiple gods at work, and to continue to use those skills to verify and justify such teachings, is that he had already translated Abraham 4 and 5. Surely other revelations and teachings that we may not know of could have brought him to this point, but the most forthright explanation is that Joseph learned of a multiple-god creation when translating Abraham 4 and 5 and then saw a confirmation of this in a less-likely but possible use of Hebrew. It is difficult to construe this particular use of Hebrew otherwise.

If this is true, then Joseph’s other uses of seemingly Hebraic-influenced phrases had also been translated *before* his study of Hebrew. In this case his Hebrew study must have also heavily influenced the way he reworded his translation of the Book of Abraham as he prepared it for publication. This would also explain why he spent time “translating” before the second installment of the Book of Abraham and not the first. It is in that second installment he would need to so thoroughly rework the text in order to incorporate the Hebrew-influenced phrases that said so well what he already learned when he first translated the text. We have tried writing the text of Abraham 4 and 5 using conventional language and then reworking it using new phrases that could arise from studying

Hebrew. We found that while it is extensive, it is not overly so; nor does it require more than a very heavy job of editing, the kind of editing that might take a day and a half. There are about 150 words that would be changed due to Joseph's understanding of Hebrew. These changes are repetitive, coming from less than a dozen words, phrases, or ideas. By far the most common change would have been changing nouns, pronouns, and verbs incumbent with representing a plurality of gods, since these changes represent almost half of the possibly Hebrew-influenced phraseology. If the plurality of gods was already present in the Abraham 4–5 text, as it seems, then there are around 80 other phrases the Prophet may have edited in order to better reflect his Hebrew-enhanced understanding of the creation. This certainly would require a somewhat extensive rewriting, but not an unusual amount, and it is not difficult to work in such changes to an already existing text. Because the Prophet would have been consulting his Hebrew grammars and lexicon during this process, he would be all the more likely to use the phrase “translate.” In summary, this hypothesis purports that Joseph translated at least through Abraham 5 by the end of 1835 and then heavily edited the last three chapters in 1842 to reflect more fully both his Hebrew learning and any fuller understanding of the gospel he had developed since his 1835 translation.

CONCLUSION

This last theory can account for almost all of the evidence (summarized in the chart below). Subscribing to this theory means there is no glaring discrepancy between the translation speed of 1835 and 1842. It incorporates all evidence from writings and sermons that suggest Joseph translated through Abraham 4 and 5 by the end of 1835. It explains the two hours it took to read the translation in 1838. It also accounts for the varying ways Hebrew was incorporated into the text. Yet it does not account for the twice-repeated break at Abraham 2:18, which is a weak but important piece of evidence. Nor does it account for the fact that the Prophet seems to have wanted to publish more of the Book of Abraham but did not. This last fact remains best explained by the notion that he wanted to publish more but had not yet translated more.

“THE WORK OF TRANSLATING”

EVIDENCE	SUGGESTS	STRENGTH OF SUGGESTION BASED ON THIS EVIDENCE
The earliest Book of Abraham manuscripts end at either Abraham 1:3, 2:2, 2:6, or 2:18.	Only up through Abraham 2:18 was translated in Kirtland.	Weak
The one and a half days of translation in 1842 do not allow much time to translate Abraham 2:19–5:21.	More than Abraham 2:18 had been translated in Kirtland.	Fairly strong
GAEL 3 uses language very similar to Abraham 3:19.	Abraham 3 was translated in Kirtland.	Strong
GAEL 6 uses language similar to Abraham 3:22.	Abraham 3 was translated in Kirtland.	Strong
Principles of astronomy were unfolded in October 1835.	Either Abraham 3 or an understanding of Facsimile 2 was revealed in Kirtland, perhaps just a revelatory impression.	Fairly strong
“Shinehah” is used as a code word in the 1835 D&C.	Abraham 3 had been translated by then.	Fairly strong
Wilford Woodruff mentions Kolob in 1837 and 1838.	Either Abraham 3 or an understanding of Facsimile 2 was revealed in Kirtland.	Strong
“Shinehah” is used in D&C 117:8.	Abraham 3 was translated in 1835.	Weak

EVIDENCE	SUGGESTS	STRENGTH OF SUGGESTION BASED ON THIS EVIDENCE
In 1839 Joseph Smith talks about astronomy and where God resides.	Either Abraham 3 or an understanding of Facsimile 2 was revealed in Kirtland.	Fairly strong
In 1838 Joseph Smith speaks on Abraham's astronomical writings.	Abraham 3 was translated in 1835.	Strong
In 1839 Joseph Smith teaches about premortal council and organization of man.	Abraham 3 was translated in 1835.	Fairly strong
In 1839 Joseph Smith writes about plurality of gods and revolutions of planets and a council of the gods.	Abraham 3 and 4 were translated in 1835.	Moderate
In 1841 Joseph Smith speaks of Adam's death taking place in a 1,000-year "day."	Abraham 5 was translated in 1835.	Moderate
In 1828 Anson Call remembers reading out loud from the Book of Abraham for two hours.	More of the Book of Abraham was translated than we now have.	Strong
In 1835 Oliver Cowdery says the papyri contains information about the Fall.	More of the Book of Abraham was translated than we now have.	Weak

“THE WORK OF TRANSLATING”

EVIDENCE	SUGGESTS	STRENGTH OF SUGGESTION BASED ON THIS EVIDENCE
William West says he heard that the papyri contained information about the Fall, Flood, Patriarchs, and lost tribes in 1836 or 1837	More of the Book of Abraham was translated than we now have.	Weak
Albert Brown speaks of the papyri containing information about Jacob.	More of the Book of Abraham was translated than we now have.	Weak
William I. Appleby speaks of the papyri containing information about the Fall.	More of the Book of Abraham was translated than we now have.	Weak
Josiah Quincy speaks of the papyri containing information about Moses and Aaron.	More of the Book of Abraham was translated than we now have.	Weak
Joseph Smith says he was translating in between the first and second publications installments of the Book of Abraham.	The material after Abraham 2:18 had not yet been translated.	Moderate
Though Joseph Smith clearly intended to publish more of the Book of Abraham, he never did.	All that had been translated was published in 1842.	Fairly strong

EVIDENCE	SUGGESTS	STRENGTH OF SUGGESTION BASED ON THIS EVIDENCE
Abraham 3 contains Hebrew phrases influenced by the 1836 study of Hebrew.	Abraham 3 was translated after 1835, which means it was translated in 1842.	Weak
Phrases influenced by the Prophet's study of Hebrew are thoroughly interwoven in Abraham 4 and 5.	Abraham 4 and 5 were translated in 1842.	Strong
The translation of "Elohim" as "gods" seems to rely on an already formed idea that there was a plurality of gods.	Joseph Smith had already translated Abraham 4 (and probably 5) by the end of 1835.	Fairly strong

At this point, there is no theory that accounts for all of the evidence. Clearly, either we need to find more evidence or create another model. Such is not surprising when dealing with a process so heavily influenced by the Divine and so scattered or absent in the historical record. For the time being, the most we can do is say that it seems likely Joseph Smith translated all of the text of the Book of Abraham we now have, and perhaps even more, by 1835. While such a theory is plausible, it remains problematic because it is simultaneously incomplete *and* the most probable of the theories proposed thus far.

NOTES

Editorial note from Kerry Muhlestein: Professor Robert Millet has had a profound impact on thousands, including me. He inspired me to work towards my current profession and has served as a model to which I aspire as a religious educator. His wisdom and foresight have helped chart the

“THE WORK OF TRANSLATING”

course of Religious Education at BYU in the broadest sense. Brother Millet is a great teacher of the Pearl of Great Price and understands the teachings of Joseph Smith better than anyone else I know. Because he and I often spoke of Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Abraham, and because of his interests in that book and the teachings of the Prophet, an article that combines these subjects seems fitting for a volume honoring him.

1. The title is taken from a phrase in which Joseph Smith asked for time to engage in the “work of translating” the papyri. See Joseph Smith, “Memorial to High Council,” June 18, 1840, Letterbook 2, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
2. “Dr. John Riggs,” *Tullidge’s Quarterly Magazine* 3, no. 3 (1884): 282.
3. “Dr. John Riggs,” 282.
4. Joseph Coe, letter to Joseph Smith, January 1, 1844, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.
5. Manuscript History of the Church, B-1, 596, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. The entries for July 1835 seem to be written by Willard Richards, probably assisted by W. W. Phelps, in 1843.
6. Manuscript History of the Church, B-1, 596.
7. W. W. Phelps, letter to Sally Phelps, September 11, 1835, in Bruce A. Van Orden, ed., “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters,” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 563.
8. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 67 (hereafter *JSP*, J1).
9. *JSP*, J1:71.
10. *JSP*, J1:107.
11. *JSP*, J1:107.
12. *JSP*, J1:109.
13. *JSP*, J1:110.
14. *JSP*, J1:110–11.
15. *JSP*, J1:140.
16. Minute Book 1, or the Kirtland High Council Minute Book, December 1832–November 1837, MS 11871, folder 1, volume 1, CHL, Salt Lake City.

17. Joseph Smith, "To the honorable the High Council of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints" June 18, 1840, Joseph Smith Collection, MS 155, box 2, folder 4, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
18. "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons*, September 1, 1841, 522.
19. Brigham Young and Willard Richards to the recorder's office, February 21, 1842, in *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, 715.
20. See Joseph Smith, "To Subscribers," *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, 710.
21. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, vol. 2 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 36, 39 (hereafter *JSP*, J2).
22. *JSP*, J2: 40.
23. *JSP*, J2:42.
24. *JSP*, J2:42. See also Joseph Smith to Edward Hunter, March 9, 1842, in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 549–50.
25. "Notice," *Times and Seasons*, February 1, 1843, 95.
26. On these manuscripts, see Brian M. Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010).
27. One manuscript covers up to Abraham 1:3, another up to Abraham 2:2, another to Abraham 2:6, and one to Abraham 2:18. See Hauglid, *Textual History*, 6. Only the first of these contains the first few verses of Abraham 1.
28. Because we have probably underestimated the amount of time he spent translating, the average is probably lower than these numbers, but they represent an accurate enough figure for comparative purposes.
29. *JSP*, J2:42.
30. Oliver Cowdery, Patriarchal Blessing Book, 2 October 1835, cited in Joseph Fielding Smith, "Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood," *Improvement Era*, October 1904, 942–43; and H. Michael Marquardt, comp., *Early Patriarchal Blessings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2007), 3.
31. *Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language* (GAEL), Kirtland Egyptian papers circa 1835–1836, MS 1295, folder 1, CHL, Salt Lake City. 3.

“THE WORK OF TRANSLATING”

32. GAEL 3 and 6 were likely created before October 1, 1835, but certainly before the end of 1835.
33. GAEL 6.
34. We are grateful to Matt Roper for pointing out the references to “Shinehah” and for general help in working through the ideas presented in this article. See also Hauglid, *Textual History*, 2.
35. Section LXXXVI in this edition corresponds with section 82 in the current edition.
36. This happens twice on page 220 of the 1835 edition.
37. Page 224 of the 1835 edition, corresponding to section 96 in the current edition.
38. Pages 241–43 of the 1835 edition, corresponding to section 104 of the current edition.
39. *JSP*, J1:67.
40. Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal: 1833–1898 Typescript* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 1:119.
41. Kenney, *Woodruff Journal*, 309.
42. *JSP*, J1:266.
43. Manuscript History of the Church, November 2, 1838–July 31, 1842, vol. C-1, 904[b], CHL, Salt Lake City.
44. Daniel 11:35, Galatians 4:2, and Alma 40:4 are other scriptural instances of variations of the phrase “appointed time.”
45. “And the Lord said unto me: Now, Abraham, these two facts exist, behold thine eyes see it; it is given unto thee to know the times of reckoning, and the set time, yea, the set time of the earth upon which thou standest, and the set time of the greater light which is set to rule the day, and the set time of the lesser light which is set to rule the night. Now the set time of the lesser light is a longer time as to its reckoning than the reckoning of the time of the earth upon which thou standest. . . . And it is given unto thee to know the set time of all the starts that are set to give light, until thou come near unto the throne of God.” (Abraham 3:6, 7, 10)
46. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 27–28.
47. Similarly, in March of 1841 Joseph Smith taught: “Now as to Adam the Lord said in the day thou shalt Eat there of thou shalt shurely Die Now the Day the Lord has Refferance too is spoken of By Petter a thousand of our years is with the Lord as one Day &c at the time the Lord said this to adam—there was No

mode of Counting time By Man, as man Now Counts time.” William P. McIntire notebook, 15, March 9, 1841, MS 1014, folder 1, CHL, Salt Lake City. While there are a number of places wherefrom the notion that God measures time differently than man could arise, the language of this sermon most closely resembles Abraham 5:13. Again, the most straightforward explanation would be that the translation of Abraham 5 influenced the Prophet’s sermon, but it could instead be that the concepts he gained elsewhere and expressed in this sermon influenced the language he employed when later translating Abraham 5. Still, without good contrary evidence, the *most likely* harmonization of the evidence gathered thus far is that the Prophet had translated through Abraham 5 before 1842.

48. Anson Call, journal of Anson Call, handwritten copy dated February 1879, MS 270.1 C156L 1987, CHL, Salt Lake City.
49. “Egyptian Mummies Ancient Records,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, December 22, 1835, 236.
50. William S. West, *A Few Interesting Facts Respecting the Rise Progress and Pretensions of the Mormons* (Ohio: self-published, 1837), 4–5. Because West saw the mummies in the temple we can date his visit to either 1836 or 1837.
51. Albert Brown to Mr. James Brown, November 1, 1835, cited in Christopher C. Lund, “A Letter Regarding the Acquisition of the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 1.
52. *William I. Appleby Autobiography and Journal*, July 6, 1848, MS 1401, folder 1, CHL, Salt Lake City, 72–73.
53. Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1892), 386.
54. See Louis C. Zucker, “Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 (1968): 51. See also 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 (1989): 31.
55. On Joseph Smith “showing off” his Hebrew knowledge in the published text of the Book of Abraham, see Michael T. Walton, “Professor Seixas, the Hebrew Bible, and the Book of Abraham,” in *Sunstone* 6 (1981): 42.
56. For example, see the first lexicon Joseph consulted: Josiah W. Gibbs, *A Manual Hebrew and English Lexicon, Including the Biblical Chaldee. Designed Particularly for Beginners* (New Haven: Hezekiah Howe, 1832), 36, where the word often translated as “create” has “to form” as the first meaning and “create” as the third possibility.

“THE WORK OF TRANSLATING”

57. See the grammar book most used by Joseph Smith: J. Seixas, *Manual Hebrew Grammar, for the Use of Beginners* (Andover: Gould and Newman, 1834), 12, 21, 32. The pronunciation is on p. 12, and definitions and use are on pp. 21, 32.
58. See Seixas, *Manual Hebrew Grammar*, 22. We are grateful to Matt Grey, who pointed out this and other references to us and who has graciously talked through these issues with us.
59. See Gibbs, *A Manual Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 229 and 27, where the definitions match precisely how Joseph Smith used them in Abraham 4.
60. Matthew Grey is doing a more thorough study of this than we are undertaking here. We are grateful to him for his help and ideas as we prepared this paper.
61. See Joseph Smith’s June 16, 1844, sermon in the Grove at Nauvoo. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 379.
62. Seixas, *Manual Hebrew Grammar*, 85.
63. Gibbs, *A Manual Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 11.
64. Moses Stuart, *A Grammar of the Hebrew Language* (Andover: Gould and Newman), 180.
65. Joseph Smith’s sermon in the Grove in Nauvoo. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 379.