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THOUGHTS ON THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

After eleven Joseph Smith Papyri fragments were returned to the Church in 1967, critics concluded that Joseph Smith had fabricated the Book of Abraham. Why? (1) The eleven fragments do not contain any text from the Book of Abraham but are part of an ancient Egyptian religious text. (2) One fragment contains hieratic characters that match characters in the left-hand margin of three 1835 manuscripts opposite Book of Abraham text, suggesting Joseph Smith's creative process. (3) The same fragment was attached to the vignette that became Facsimile 1, suggesting that Abraham 1:12 refers to the characters on the fragment. (4) The Egyptian in Facsimile 3 does not translate to Joseph Smith's explanation. This chapter will deal with issues 2 and 3.

As a young boy, I was somewhat inquisitive about spiritual matters. I remember occasional evenings peering out my bedroom window at the nighttime sky wondering what this life was all about. During one of those evenings, I heard a distinct voice in my mind say, "You are a son of Abraham." This thought had never entered my mind before, and I was too young at the time to realize its significance, but it has left a profound impression upon me to this day. Since that time, whenever I hear the name Abraham, I reflect back to that experience and feel a close affinity to him.

Many years later, in 1976, Latter-day Saint missionaries taught me the restored gospel, which resulted in my baptism that June. As time went on, I became more familiar with the sacred restored scriptures and developed a deep love and testimony of them, particularly the Book of Abraham. Over the decades that I have studied

this book, my appreciation for Abraham and his faith in the Lord has increased considerably. I have also appreciated how the Book of Abraham complements or is complemented by the other standard works. When I read the Book of Abraham, I can hear the voice of God speaking to me.

To show how the Book of Abraham has impacted my life since I was baptized, I offer a brief overview of a few of my personal experiences. After graduating in Near Eastern Studies from Brigham Young University in 1984, I decided to enter a master's program in Middle East Studies—Arabic at the University of Utah. During my time there, I applied for and received a position as a seminary teacher for the Church Educational System. While working as a seminary teacher, I finished the master's degree and continued on at the University of Utah in a PhD program in Middle East Studies—Arabic.

Toward the end of my PhD studies, I began communicating with a researcher at the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). He had begun a project to gather traditions about the early life of Abraham from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources. His thought was to investigate these traditions to see if they contained various themes or motifs found in the Book of Abraham; if so, this could give evidence to its antiquity. He asked if I was interested in translating from the Arabic those Islamic sources that had not yet been translated into English. I was intrigued and offered my assistance.

During this same period, I finished my PhD and was transferred to Brigham Young University to teach for one year for Religious Education. During that year (1998), I was offered a full-time position in the Department of Ancient Scripture.

For the next several years, I translated a number of Islamic texts that came to be included in a book that contained Abrahamic traditions from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and several other religious traditions. Along the way I was invited as one of three principal compilers and editors (with John Tvedtnes and John Gee) of the volume titled *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, UT:

FARMS, 2001). In the course of that project, we discovered that certain themes in the Book of Abraham (not found in the Genesis account) such as the sacrifice of Abraham, idolatry in Abraham's day, priesthood, and revelation were also found in these nonbiblical sources. Again, this told us that the Book of Abraham bears the marks of an ancient text.

While researching for that book, and on more than one occasion, I felt led to certain Islamic sources that I had not known about beforehand. In each case, something in the newly discovered text added to the mounting material showing some kind of connection to the Book of Abraham. At those times, my mind reflected back to my boyhood experience, and I felt that my life was becoming more and more attached to the patriarch Abraham, and it appeared to me that it would continue to do so.

This proved to be the case in more ways than one. I had already had the privilege of helping to compile and edit the *Traditions* book, but around the same time, I was also invited to be a principal investigator and series editor (with John Gee) for volumes included in the Studies in the Book of Abraham series that FARMS would publish. The *Traditions* book became the first of what we hoped would be many more volumes investigating various aspects of the Book of Abraham.¹ It seemed clear at this point that a good portion of my professional research time was to be spent focusing on the Book of Abraham.

At some point during those years, a researcher at FARMS informed me about another project he had been working on for some time that was related to the Book of Abraham. He produced a document in which he had gone through the five chapters in the Book of Abraham showing how the text had changed over time from the manuscript stage through its editions and up to the 1981 edition. The scholarly world refers to this kind of project as a critical text. This does not mean one tries to be critical of the text, but rather one tries to determine the original text by detailing the history of the text from its earliest to latest point. In this sense, the word *critical* means

detailed, as in a detailed history of the text using certain symbols to indicate cross-outs, insertions, and variant readings in manuscripts or editions.

For various reasons, this researcher was not able to see this project through to completion. But in the ensuing climate, it became ever clearer that this project should continue and result in a publication. This was at a time when several textual projects were under way such as the critical text project for the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses, as well as projects to publish typographic transcriptions of the Joseph Smith Translation. A major undertaking was also in the works to provide transcriptions of papers related to the Prophet Joseph Smith. This would come to be called the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Thus the timing was right for the Book of Abraham.

I became increasingly interested in finishing the textual study of the Book of Abraham. Although my formal training focused on Arabic and Islamic studies, I was already somewhat familiar with textual research and felt confident I could learn the necessary things to do a textual study of the Book of Abraham. In fact, I have learned since that most who do text-critical analysis did not start out in that field but came into it because of a specific need to do so.

Sometime later, I and several colleagues drafted a proposal to the Church History Department in Salt Lake City asking permission to examine the original manuscripts associated with the Book of Abraham. Since 1847, the Church History Department has housed three manuscripts from 1835 Kirtland containing roughly Abraham 1:1–2:18 and several manuscripts from the Nauvoo period (1842) containing Abraham 1:1–2:18, 3:18–26, and the explanations to Facsimiles 1 and 2. Various scribes such as W. W. Phelps, Frederick G. Williams, Warren Parrish, and Willard Richards produced these handwritten manuscripts. In addition, the Church houses a number of manuscripts from 1835–36 Kirtland that evidence an effort of the early brethren to decipher the Egyptian

language. Both the Abraham and Egyptian papers are often referred to as the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers.”²

After receiving permission to view the manuscripts, I began a series of research trips up to the Church History Department to analyze the Abraham manuscripts. I learned two things about these manuscripts: first, how the critics view them, and second, how complex they are.

I learned that the critics have attacked the Book of Abraham since the Egyptian papyri first came into the hands of the Prophet Joseph Smith in July 1835. Put simply, these attacks have focused mainly on the credibility of the Prophet as a translator. As B. H. Roberts once noted, “If Joseph Smith’s translation of the Egyptian parchment could be discredited, and proven false, then doubt would be thrown also upon the genuineness of his translation of the *Book of Mormon*, and thus all his pretensions as a translator would be exposed and come to naught.”³ Roberts made this statement after Bishop Spalding, an Episcopal bishop in Salt Lake City, sent copies of the facsimiles to Egyptian scholars in 1912 to prove, once and for all, that the Prophet was a fraud. Even though Spalding exulted in the results of the experts, Roberts concluded, “‘Mormonism’ was not moved a peg by the *critique*.”⁴

A renewed campaign against the Book of Abraham arose after 1967, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art returned to the Church eleven fragments from a larger original Egyptian papyri collection that the Prophet had in his possession.⁵ Again the credibility of Joseph Smith as a translator was brought into question. This time, instead of focusing on Joseph Smith’s explanations of the facsimiles, the critics turned to the three above-mentioned surviving manuscripts from the 1835 Kirtland period and one from 1842 Nauvoo that contained text from the Book of Abraham. The 1835 manuscripts share one very unusual characteristic: each one has Egyptian hieratic characters in the left margin opposite a paragraph of English text from the Book of Abraham.

At first glance, one could be tempted to surmise that these manuscripts represent the actual translation papers of the Prophet. And, of course, this is precisely what the critics against the Book of Abraham want us to believe. For the critics, the English text in these manuscripts, opposite the characters, clearly evidence the Prophet's dictated translation of the hieratic characters. To bolster their case, the critics note that the Egyptian characters in these manuscripts come from one of the eleven fragments donated to the Church in 1967. Furthermore, this particular fragment, with the hieratic characters, was also once attached to another fragment that contains the representation of Facsimile 1. This leads them to Abraham 1:12, which says, "The representation at the commencement of this record," concluding that Joseph Smith thought that the fragment, once attached to the Facsimile 1 fragment, contained the Book of Abraham. The coup de grace of their argument centers on modern Egyptologists translating the hieratic characters and finding that they do not translate to the Book of Abraham. In fact, Egyptologists argue that the papyri are merely a Greco-Roman Egyptian religious text resembling the ancient Book of the Dead.

So what is factual in these arguments? This is where things tend to get somewhat complicated. First, the hieratic characters in the three manuscripts do, in reality, come from one of the eleven fragments. Second, this fragment, from which the Egyptian characters were taken, was initially attached to the Facsimile 1 papyrus. And third, the hieratic characters do not translate to the Book of Abraham. In fact, except for the Facsimile 1 papyrus, nothing related to the Book of Abraham appears on any of the papyri fragments the Metropolitan Museum of Art returned to the Church.

While closely examining the Abraham manuscripts, one fact quickly became clear: all of the surviving manuscripts containing text of the Book of Abraham represent copies of earlier documents. This means that, unlike the Book of Mormon, we have no originally dictated manuscripts for the Book of Abraham.

We have a fairly good idea of how Joseph Smith worked when it came to receiving revelation and dictating it to a scribe. From the surviving originally dictated manuscripts of the Book of Mormon, we know that there was no paragraphing, sentence structure, or punctuation because the text in the dictated manuscripts appears as one long sentence. Joseph Smith appears to have dictated the Book of Mormon text in a generally continuous fashion, rarely stopping. The text in the Abraham manuscripts, on the other hand, exhibits paragraphing, sentence structure, and punctuation that would be characteristic of text that had evolved well beyond the dictation phase.

Another way to determine if handwritten text has been copied from an earlier manuscript is to study the errors. Sometimes when a scribe would copy text from an earlier manuscript to another sheet, the eye would see the same word twice and accidentally rewrite it. Often the scribe caught the error right away and crossed out the repeated word. Also, periodically, the scribe's eye would see a word on one line and turn away and then, when returning to the page, focus on a different line, see the same word, and omit the text in between. Erasures or cross-outs can also be quite revealing. Once in a while the crossed-out or erased word or phrase will show that the scribe saw the word or phrase ahead of where the scribe actually was in the text. When this happened, the scribe would generally quickly catch it, cross it out, and put the word or phrase in its proper place. Errors such as those described above happen frequently enough in the earliest Abraham manuscripts to give very strong evidence that all of them are copies of even earlier manuscripts that have not survived.

So if the few surviving Abraham manuscripts are not the originally dictated manuscripts, what are they? Why do the three 1835 manuscripts have the hieratic characters opposite paragraphs of English text from the Book of Abraham? As mentioned above, most of the characters can be found on one of the fragments of papyri that belonged to Joseph Smith. How is this to be explained?

Is it possible that these manuscripts, though not originally dictated, represent the actual process Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Abraham? I have thought much about this possibility, but this method is nowhere reinforced in other translation activities of the Prophet, particularly in his translation of the Book of Mormon. That Joseph Smith spent considerable time learning new languages is clearly demonstrated in the historical record, but it was generally a separate pursuit from his revelatory experiences. It seems that he was quite aware of the distinction between his own personal educational pursuits and his work as a seer.

Another factor that relates to the question of whether the 1835 Abraham papers represent the process of translation concerns the idea that Joseph Smith may have thought he was translating from the characters but, in reality, was not. In this case, the Lord allowed him to think this was the case. This theory argues for some type of idiot-prophet scenario. However, without the originally dictated Abraham manuscripts, it is impossible to conjecture how the translation process took place. Although, we do have evidence that the Book of Mormon translation process was not dependent on some type of character-to-text system.⁶

What follows are a few observations concerning the three 1835 Abraham papers. It may be that Joseph Smith received the entire Book of Abraham as early as the beginning of July 1835. Since all of the Abraham manuscripts that have survived appear to be copies of earlier manuscripts and date to October or November 1835, they seem to show some dependency on already-revealed Book of Abraham text.

Having more than one copy of the same text was not unusual during the time of Joseph Smith. This gives evidence to the fact that he desired to make the text available to the Saints as early as possible. It also shows that when the text was copied from one manuscript to another, it went through various changes. Most of the changes were relatively minor, but they were changes nonetheless. This

demonstrates that the text was still evolving, which was quite characteristic of sacred text making its way to a publishable form.

One question I have asked is why it took so long to publish the Book of Abraham. Certainly the Prophet viewed the Book of Abraham as a sacred text and likely desired to publish an official version. It is known as well that Joseph Smith desired to make his new translation of the Bible (which included the Book of Moses) available to the Saints after he had finished it in July of 1833. One way to approach an answer as to why it took so long is to understand that the bulk of scriptural material—the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants⁷—was published before the purchase of the Egyptian papyri. After this 1834–35 period, the level of new scripture added to existing canon dramatically decreases.

What seems to have happened is Joseph Smith's life became more and more complicated as time passed. Highlights of the years following his translation of the Book of Abraham include his taking up Hebrew and finishing the Kirtland Temple in 1836, dealing with the fall of the Kirtland Bank and severe apostasy in 1837–38, being imprisoned in the Liberty Jail in 1839, moving the Saints to Nauvoo in 1840, and all the time dealing with persecutors and pressing church business. Thus it is no surprise that despite the likelihood that Joseph Smith desired to make the Book of Abraham available to the Saints sooner, he was unable to do so until the early 1840s in Nauvoo, when printing and publishing circumstances improved.

As far as the Egyptian characters in the manuscripts are concerned, it is still uncertain as to what precisely their purpose was. Nibley argued that Joseph Smith's scribes were trying to learn Egyptian and so tried to do a reverse translation. That is to say they worked to match already revealed Abraham text with hieratic characters in the Joseph Smith Papyri.⁸

The question of the Egyptian characters in these 1835 manuscripts requires more testing to determine whether the ink of the characters matches the ink of the text. This would help to see if the

characters were placed on the paper at the same time as the text. If the characters were drawn on the page after the text, it could mean the text was not meant to be a direct translation of the character. Some preliminary ink analysis has already been done, and there does appear to be some inconsistency in the inks. A report of this testing will be forthcoming. However, since it is unlikely testing will be able to give a definitive answer to the ink questions, the question as to why the characters were placed on the manuscripts could also forever remain a mystery. What follows are a few more considerations of these Egyptian characters.

One of the 1835 Abraham manuscripts is written in the hand of W. W. Phelps and covers Abraham 1:1–3. Here Phelps put two Egyptian characters in the margin and assigned the numbers 1 and 2 respectively. Then, in the Abraham text opposite the characters, he placed a number 1 or 2 for the text that corresponded to the Egyptian character with the same number. So the number 1 corresponded to “In the land of the Chaldeans” and “saw,” and the number 2 corresponded to the name “Abraham.” However, this is as far as Phelps developed the system. Although there is more text and one more character, for some unknown reason the numbering system quickly ends.

None of the other Abraham manuscripts follows the same numbering system that Phelps implemented in the early part of Abraham 1:1–3. But, as mentioned earlier, the characters are similar between the manuscripts and are placed in the same general locations of the text (which begins at Abraham 1:4) and usually at the beginning of new paragraphs.

Of course, it is possible that some of the early brethren believed that the Book of Abraham followed the vignette of Facsimile 1 and may have incorrectly determined that the characters on Joseph Smith Papyri XI that followed the vignette should translate to the Book of Abraham. If this were the case, it makes sense that the 1835 Abraham papers are copies of earlier manuscripts. This would mean that the Book of Abraham had already been revealed and written

down and that these papers are merely copies of the revealed text and represent some type of attempt to connect the Abraham text to the Egyptian characters, perhaps in some sort of reverse-translation project. One major criticism of the reverse-translation theory is that it is difficult to accept that the brethren working on these papers could believe that large paragraphs of Abraham text could come from one single Egyptian character. In this light, it appears that Phelps did not believe a single Egyptian character could produce a large paragraph of text because he connected only a single word or a small phrase to a character in his short-lived numbering system.

It could also be possible these Egyptian characters were used as markers for copying. In this scenario, the scribe would count the lines of a portion of text and mark it with a beginning and ending character. Thus the scribe would know the exact amount of text to put on a page. This would explain why the 1835 manuscripts so closely correspond to each other in terms of both the character and the amount of text between the characters. Suffice it to say, the Egyptian characters in the margins of the 1835 Abraham manuscripts still present a real challenge of interpretation for the researcher, and it will likely take more time, testing, and patience to edge closer to a more complete understanding of their presence.

As mentioned, this collection also includes Egyptian papers that evidence some sort of effort to decipher the Egyptian. These papers bear no outward connection to the Abraham papers as the Egyptian characters in the Abraham manuscripts come from other areas of the papyri. In fact, the majority of characters in the Abraham manuscripts are not found at all in the Egyptian papers. It seems that Phelps was the driving force behind the efforts to learn Egyptian because most of the manuscripts are in his handwriting. Only one Egyptian alphabet manuscript is in the handwriting of Joseph Smith, and another Egyptian alphabet manuscript is in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. This squares well with some of the statements of the Prophet from his journal accounts about trying to create an Egyptian

egyptian Alphabet first degree

10

1. Ah the first being who exercises Supreme power
 2. phah the first man or one who has Kingly powers
 3. phia a more universal reign having greater dominion
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The second part first degree

1. Ahmav God without beginning or end
 2. Alph in the beginning with God the Son of
 3. Albeth Angels or disembodied spirits
 4. Alcateth Angels in an unalterable immortal state
 5. Achibeth ministers of God high preceptors
 6. Alchibeth ministers of God under or the lips
 7. Alehbet ministers who are lips singular persons
 8. Baeth the name of all mankind men or men
 9. Baeth Ka Adam or the first man or first thing
 10. Baeth Ke the next from Adam or ordained
 11. Baeth Ki the third patriarch
 12. Baeth Ka the fourth from Adam
 13. Baeth Ke

Egyptian Alphabet document in the handwriting of Joseph Smith, 1835 (Church History Library, Salt Lake City, MS 1295 fol. 4).

alphabet. However, Phelps still seems to be the prime mover of the studies of Egyptian.

At this point the Egyptian manuscripts appear to be dependent on the text of the Book of Abraham. That is to say, the Book of Abraham was already in existence before the Egyptian papers were produced. Also, the Egyptian papers may show influence from Masonry and the Doctrine and Covenants. However, it is difficult to determine exactly what Phelps and some of the early brethren were trying to do with these papers. They may have been trying to learn ancient Egyptian, uncover a primordial pure language, or create some kind of substitution system. This has yet to be determined, if possible. But one thing is clear—the Book of Abraham is closely related to the Egyptian manuscripts. Hopefully, future research will give us more detail on the precise nature of this relationship.

After all this research, I have come to understand that these papers provide ample opportunity to try and solve a good mystery. In some ways, I have learned some invaluable material about the papers, but in other ways the mystery only deepens.

One thing I have tried to do all along in this important research is to make sure my focus on academic results does not in any way get tangled up with my spiritual witness of the Book of Abraham. That is to say, my hearing the voice of God in the sacred text of the Book of Abraham is not dependent on my secular findings in this research. I have become quite aware that secular pursuits using scientific methods and argumentation are just that—secular; and spiritual pursuits using faith and the Spirit are an entirely different path to learning truths.

I know that the Book of Abraham is the word of God, but at the same time I do not know exactly how it originated. Both truth and uncertainty exist side by side in this case, and likely in many others cases, if the path of faith is chosen.

Notes

1. Four more volumes have been published since the *Traditions* book: *The Holy Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*, by Michael Rhodes (Provo,

- UT: FARMS, 2003); *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub: A Translation and Commentary*, by Michael D. Rhodes (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010); and *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions*, by Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010).
2. However, several of the manuscripts come from the Nauvoo period, so the name “Kirtland Egyptian Papers” is somewhat misleading.
 3. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930), 2:138.
 4. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 2:138. Hugh Nibley addressed the 1912 critics in several articles as a part of a series in the *Improvement Era* published in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These articles have been reprinted in *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, vol. 18 of *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009).
 5. See Kerry Muhlestein’s treatment of the papyri, pp. 209–35 of this volume.
 6. “The plates lay covered on the table, while Joseph’s head was in a hat looking at the seerstone, which by this time had replaced the interpreters.” Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 71–72.
 7. About 107 sections of the Doctrine and Covenants had been revealed before July 1835 and were published in the 1835 edition that was made available in August 1835.
 8. See Hugh W. Nibley, “The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” in *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 502–68.