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Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations

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ASSESSING THE JOSEPH SMITH PAPYRI: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THEIR ACQUISITIONS, TRANSLATIONS, AND INTERPRETATIONS

Kerry Muhlestein

Abstract: The Book of Abraham has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention since some of the papyri once owned by Joseph Smith were rediscovered. A focus of this attention has been the source of the Book of Abraham, with some contending that the extant fragments are the source, while others have argued that the source is either other papyri or something else altogether. New investigations suggest that, while the relationship between papyri and text is not clear, it is clear that the fragments are not the source and that the method of translation was not the Kirtland Egyptian Papers. Additionally, further investigations into the source of the Book of Abraham as well as the interpretations of the facsimiles have made it clear that much of the controversy about the Book of Abraham has been based on untested assumptions. Book of Abraham studies have made significant strides forward in the last few decades, while some avenues of research are in need of further pursuit.

Introduction

In 1967 several papyri fragments once owned by Joseph Smith resurfaced to the public eye. These papyri, known as the Joseph Smith Papyri (JSP), are associated with the LDS scriptural text called the Book of Abraham. Questions about the relationship between the papyri and the scriptural text led to questions about Joseph Smith's translation abilities, which in turn led to questions about the prophetic abilities of the LDS church's founding prophet. These are important questions. Here we will outline some key events as well as the development of the most important questions and issues that have surrounded these papyri. An exhaustive treatment of all the questions and discussions is not possible

in this venue. In order to facilitate easier reading, in this article some of the historiographic treatment takes place in the footnotes. A more comprehensive treatment will have to wait for a book-length manuscript. Instead, here we will outline the most important arguments.¹

At the outset, it is important to note that most of the arguments about the validity of the Book of Abraham have centered on the issue of authority. The earliest attacks on the Book of Abraham (discussed below) focused on appeals to the scholastic authority of academic scholars. Similarly, much of the defense of the Book of Abraham by Latter-day Saints has been based on the academic authority of believing scholars. I have argued that personal revelation is also an authentic, valid avenue of learning.² Some have noted that many LDS Egyptologists put forth what appear to be convincing arguments but some readers later come to perceive that their credibility or authority is somewhat doubtful because non-LDS Egyptologists who have written about the subject have disagreed with their point of view. It seems to have gone unnoticed that the vast majority of Egyptologists have said nothing at all about this matter. A very small minority has taken any kind of position regarding the Joseph Smith papyri controversy. Of those who have, it is certainly not their primary research concern, so they have typically put very little time into investigating these issues and the associated details. Thus it is important to note that LDS Egyptologists have spent more time studying the Egyptological issues associated with the Book of Abraham than any non-LDS Egyptologists, though this does not necessarily mean they are correct about everything they write. It is even more important to note that all scholars who say something about this topic are heavily influenced by their original point of view. Understanding the different points of view of these sources of authority is an important part of the epistemological process — the process of learning about the historiography of the study of the Book of Abraham. We can understand the history of the conversation best when we first understand the base assumptions made by all who have been involved in this dialogue.

1 In the interest of full disclosure, it is important to know that I am a believing Latter-day Saint who is employed by Brigham Young University, which is owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is also important to note that this article is intended to be an introduction to the topic and that arguments that seem to me to have been less well founded will be given only the most cursory of treatments or, in some cases, are not even noted here.

2 See my address given at BYU-Hawaii in November 2013, entitled “The Book of Abraham, Joseph Smith, Revelation, and You,” available online through BYU-Hawaii’s website: <http://devotional.byuh.edu/media131112>.

Towards that end, we must acknowledge that when it comes to Joseph Smith's ability to translate, a student of the issue truly has only two choices: that Joseph Smith could translate by the gift of God or that he could not. There really is not a middle ground. One has to make a choice about Joseph Smith's translating ability — or ignore it, as most do, which means that a decision has been made but most often not consciously.

I believe all parties agree that Joseph Smith could not translate Egyptian via conventional methods.³ To go beyond this original agreement, all involved make a faith-based choice. It is disingenuous and intellectually dishonest to impose a false sense of objectivity on the nature of this choice. Believing that Joseph Smith could translate with the help of God is a faith-based choice, one made based on a belief that cannot be proved. Believing it is impossible for Joseph Smith (or anyone else) to translate with the help of God is also a faith-based choice, one based on a belief that cannot be proved. Yet this choice colors the way we see everything else in regard to the Book of Abraham.

In our historiographic discussion, let us start out with the realization that those who believe that someone *can* translate as a gift of God and that this *did* happen with Joseph Smith will interpret all the evidence differently than someone who believes that a person *cannot* translate as a gift of God or that some people can, but *not* Joseph Smith. As a result, all non-LDS Egyptologists (i.e., all Egyptologists who have chosen to believe that Joseph Smith was not prophetically blessed by God) will see things differently than all LDS Egyptologists (i.e., all Egyptologists who have chosen to believe that Joseph Smith was prophetically blessed by God). This should not be surprising to anyone, but we *must* be aware that this beginning assumption is so large that it will inevitably lead to vastly different conclusions.

In regard to researchers, the story of the Book of Abraham spans many disciplines, and hence requires scholarship from many fields. Whereas there are some Egyptological aspects of the discussions surrounding the Book of Abraham, they are not the only pertinent ones, and may actually be some of the less important elements. Thus it is important to have Egyptologists discuss those issues, but it is equally if not more important to delve into issues regarding nineteenth century history, the history of ancient manuscripts, the history of modern manuscripts, semiotics, and

3 No one in America could translate Egyptian in Joseph Smith's day. See John Gee, "Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt," in Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds. *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2015), 427–36, especially 436.

issues of faith. Accordingly, scholarship regarding the Book of Abraham involves input from those who have training and experience in all of these fields. Hugh Nibley, an early leading scholar in Book of Abraham studies, articulated this point some time ago:

Consider for a moment the scope and complexity of the materials with which the student *must* cope if he would undertake a serious study of the Book of Abraham's authenticity. At the very least he must be thoroughly familiar with (1) the texts of the "Joseph Smith Papyri" identified as belonging to the Book of the Dead, (2) the content and nature of mysterious "Sen-sen" fragment, (3) the so-called "Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar" attributed to Joseph Smith, (4) statements by and about Joseph Smith concerning the nature of the Book of Abraham and its origin, (5) the original document of Facsimile 1 with its accompanying hieroglyphic inscriptions, (6) the text of the Book of Abraham itself in its various editions, (7) the three facsimiles as reproduced in various editions of the Pearl of Great Price, (8) Joseph Smith's explanation of the facsimiles, (9) the large and growing literature of ancient traditions and legends about Abraham in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Greek, Slavonic, etc., and (10) the studies and opinions of modern scholars on all aspects of the Book of Abraham.⁴

More recently, LDS Egyptologist John Gee, speaking at a meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, additionally remarked,

If you decide you want to enter the debate [on the JSP and Book of Abraham], you ought to do some real homework. There is a large bibliography, and there are dozens of theories to master, not to mention a large body of evidence. ... You have to pay attention to what Latter-day Saints say about the papyri. It is they who have traced the history of the papyri, dug up what information is known about Antonio Lebolo, identified Joseph Smith Papyri X–XI as a Book of Breathing, and done much basic work on hypocephali, and they are the

4 Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 14 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2000), 154–55.

people who have access to the original documents. They know their own history much better than others do.⁵

Unfortunately, many who have waded into the debate surrounding the JSP and the Book of Abraham, especially non-specialists writing in popular venues, have not paid close heed to these warnings from Nibley and Gee, with the predictable result that their writings often suffer from many methodological and factual errors.

In summary, when embarking on a study of issues surrounding the Book of Abraham, one must be ready to deal with a myriad of theories, methodologies, and disciplines. More importantly, one must be cognizant of often unnoticed underlying assumptions and, most of all, of faith-based choices that color the way all evidence is evaluated. If we are aware of these choices and assumptions, we can more clearly evaluate the history of the Joseph Smith Papyri.⁶

History of the Papyri

We cannot understand the issues surrounding the Joseph Smith Papyri and Book of Abraham without knowing some of the story behind them.⁷ When Napoleon invaded Egypt, he opened a wave of Western exploration that the country had never known.⁸ Soon after his defeat, many European countries sent consuls to Egypt with one major goal: bring back amazing

5 John Gee, "New Light on the Joseph Smith Papyri," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 2 (2007): 258.

6 I wish to acknowledge that different versions of portions of this article have appeared in slightly different forms in various online sources. I further wish to acknowledge that many of the ideas I put forward in this article were independently reached by many other scholars. In particular, so much similar work has been done by John Gee that I can no longer always tell what ideas were independently reached by the two of us as opposed to those ideas that were interdependently reached.

7 For an important discussion on how to deal with the history of the papyri, see John Gee, "Telling the Story of the Joseph Smith Papyri," [review of James R. Harris, *The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Study of the Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri* (Payson, UT: Harris, 1990); *For His Ka: Essays Offered in Memory of Klaus Baer*, David P. Silverman, ed. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1994)] in *The FARMS Review*, 8/2, 1996.

8 See Nicolas-Philibert Desvernois, *Mémoires du Général Baron Desvernois* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1898), 67; Brian M. Fagan, *Rape of the Nile* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1975), 72–76; Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 60–63, 98; and Hornung, *Secret Lore of Egypt*, 131–34.

antiquities — and that is exactly what they did.⁹ Mohammed Ali, the man who oversaw Egypt on behalf of the Ottoman Empire, was eager to seek Western European help in modernizing his country. He and most Muslims of the time also viewed the ancient Egyptian monuments as relics of abominable paganism, so he was happy to trade monuments for help in modernizing Egypt. Thus a flood of artifacts flowed from Egypt into European museums, creating the foundation of some of the greatest museums in the world, such as the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Berlin Museum.¹⁰ In one of the most interesting twists of LDS history, this movement of artifacts would bring a set of papyri to Joseph Smith.

As the various European governments competed for Egyptian artifacts, one of the key figures in the excavation game was an Italian named Antonio Lebolo, who worked for the French consul. Lebolo helped create many important collections, including major contributions to the Turin Museum and the Louvre. He also sold smaller groups of artifacts to private collectors. One of these small groups, eleven mummies and a handful of papyrus, made its way to the U.S.¹¹ This was the first large collection of Egyptian antiquities to arrive in the States.¹²

This prize show made its way around the country, setting up in hotel lobbies and advertising in local papers. People flocked to see actual Egyptian mummies. At some point a man named Michael Chandler

9 See Alberto Siliotti, ed., *Belzoni's Travels* (London: The British Museum Press, 2001); and Fekri A. Hassan, "Imperialist Appropriations of Egyptian Obelisks," in *Views of Ancient Egypt since Napoleon Bonaparte: Imperialism, Colonialism and Modern Appropriations*, ed. David Jeffreys (London: University College London Press, 2003).

10 For more on all of this see Kerry Muhlestein, "European Views of Egyptian Magic and Mystery: a Cultural Context for the Magic Flute," *BYU Studies* 43, no. 3 (2004): 137–148; "Prelude to the Pearl: Sweeping Events Leading to the Discovery of the Joseph Smith Papyri," in *Prelude to the Restoration: from Apostasy to the Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004), 130–141.

11 For a slightly outdated but excellent description of how the papyri got to America, see H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995); John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000). Gee has updated and expanded his publication, which will soon be published with Deseret Book as *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*. Also see John Gee, "New Light on the Joseph Smith Papyri."

12 See S.J. Wolfe and Robert Singerman, *Mummies in Nineteenth Century America. Ancient Egyptians as Artifacts* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009).

either gained possession of the collection or assumed its care on behalf of other owners. For a while he traveled with the displayed mummies, but eventually he started to sell them. By the time he had sold all but four of the mummies, one of his friends, a man named Benjamin Bullock, who had relatives who believed in Joseph Smith's prophetic ability to translate, convinced Chandler to take the mummies and papyri to Joseph Smith in Kirtland, Ohio, hoping his interest in ancient documents would make him a potential buyer.¹³

When Joseph Smith came to see the papyri, he was immediately interested. Smith was allowed to take them to his home to study them.¹⁴ During his study he learned through revelation that the papyri contained the writings of Abraham and of Joseph of Egypt.¹⁵ He deeply desired the papyri, but Chandler would not sell them separately from the mummies. So even in the midst of trying to finance the last stages of building the Kirtland Temple, the prophet found a few followers who supplied enough money for the papyri and mummies to be purchased.¹⁶

Once Joseph Smith received the papyri, he immediately began translating them with the help of some of his closest companions. He also seems to have quickly begun trying to make an alphabet and grammar of Egyptian, as discussed below. However, no translation efforts seem to have been made during August and September, as other business was attended to during these months. On October 1, work on the papyri recommenced.¹⁷ The most consistent period of translation seems to have taken place in late November. For a few weeks Joseph Smith spent time almost every day working on the papyri.¹⁸ As the year ended, he took up studying Hebrew and seemingly left the study of Egyptian and the

13 Clara Fullmer Bullock, *Life Story of Benjamin Bullock III* (Alberta, Canada: self-published family history, 1952), 9, 11–15, 17.

14 *Autobiography of Dr. John Riggs*, p. 1, Harold B. Lee Library Special Collections. Also "Dr. John Riggs," in *Tullidge's Quarterly Magazine* 3/3 (1884): 282.

15 Manuscript History of the Church, Book 1, p. 596, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

16 Letter from Joseph Coe to Joseph Smith, 1 January 1844 as cited in Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham*, 7–8.

17 *The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals vol. 1: 1832–1839*, Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds. (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 67.

18 *Ibid.*, 67–76.

papyri behind almost completely.¹⁹ He would return to it minimally a few times before his death.

Eventually the mummies and papyri moved to Nauvoo, where they stayed with Joseph Smith for the rest of his life.²⁰ For the most part, the antiquities were on display in the Mansion House. Throughout the Illinois period, Lucy Mack Smith, the Prophet's mother, showed the antiquities to visitors, sometimes taking the lead even when her son was with her.

After a few years in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith became the editor of the Church's semi-monthly newspaper, the *Times and Seasons*. This was the organ which the Church used to disseminate information and many teachings. Almost immediately the Prophet used this venue to begin

19 On the relationship of the study of Hebrew and the translation of the Book of Abraham, see Kerry Muhlestein and Megan Hansen, "'The Work of Translating': the Book of Abraham's Translation Chronology," in Spencer Fluhman, Brent L. Top, eds., *Let Us Reason Together: Reflections on the Life of Study and Faith, Essays in Honor of Robert L. Millet*, (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2015, 139–62); Matthew J. Grey, "'The Word of the Lord in the Original,' Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew in Kirtland," in Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds. *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2015), 249–302; and Michael T. Walton, "Professor Sexias, the Hebrew Bible, and the Book of Abraham," *Sunstone* 6 (March–April 1981): 41–43. Muhlestein and Hansen's work about when various portions of the Book of Abraham were translated is the latest in a series of studies regarding this. See also Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, and Hauglid, *Textual History*, 2–4.

20 Recently quite a bit of work has been done on how Joseph Smith and other Latter-day Saints of his day viewed the antiquities and their connection to the Bible. See Kerry Muhlestein, "Joseph Smith's Biblical Views of Egypt," in Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds. *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2015), 447–71; Kerry Muhlestein, "Papyri and Presumptions: A careful examination of the assumptions and eyewitness accounts associated with the Joseph Smith Papyri," the *Journal of Mormon History*, forthcoming. Additionally, on the topic of how to evaluate Joseph Smith's non-prophetic statements, ideas, and perhaps even speculations about antiquities, see a lecture I have given, "Joseph Smith and Egyptian Artifacts: Towards a Preliminary Paradigm for Evaluating Prophetic and Mundane Ideas Regarding Aspects of the Ancient World," presented at the annual BYU Church History Symposium: *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith's Study of the Ancient World*, held at Brigham Young University and Salt Lake City, March, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzP0iuNLa10>. I expand on this in an article titled "Joseph Smith and Egyptian Artifacts: Towards a Preliminary Model for Evaluating Prophetic and Mundane Ideas Regarding Aspects of the Ancient World," *BYU Studies*, forthcoming.

publishing his translation of the Book of Abraham. In the March 1 edition, he published Facsimile One, its explanation, and Abraham 1:1 through 2:18. In the next edition, March 15, Facsimile Two, its explanation, and the rest of the Book of Abraham were printed. A few editions later, on May 15, Facsimile Three and its explanation were published. The newspaper promised that more of the book would be printed, but it never was.²¹

When Joseph Smith was killed, his mother maintained possession of the antiquities and showed them to visitors for several years. For a short time she stayed with her daughter Lucy, but for most of her remaining life she lived with Emma, the Prophet's wife, and displayed her antiquities there. Within two weeks of Mother Smith's death, Emma and her new husband, Louis Biddamon, sold the mummies and papyri to a man named Abel Combs.²²

Combs sold most of the collection to a man who put them in the St. Louis Museum. For a long time, it was thought the entire collection was at the St. Louis Museum. As it turns out, at least two mummies and the two long papyri rolls (one described as the long roll, one as the short, though it still seems to be quite lengthy) were taken there. We do not know where the other two mummies went. After some time the collection in St. Louis was sold to a museum in Chicago. That museum was burned in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The catalogues of the museum from before the fire list the mummies and papyri as part of the museum's collection, but they are not listed as part of the collection that survived the fire.²³ This is not surprising, as both mummies and papyri are highly flammable. Because it was thought the entire collection had been sold to the St. Louis Museum, it was also thought that all of the Mormon antiquities had been lost to fire. It was not until several decades later that the public learned that not all the papyri had been sold. Combs

21 Notice from the editor (John Taylor), *Times and Seasons*, vol. 4, February 1, 1843, 95.

22 A great deal of work in tracing the history of the papyri and mummies was done by Jay Todd, *The Saga of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1969). H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1995), greatly furthered that research and was aided in his research by Brian Smith, who has continued that work. See Brian L. Smith interview by Philip R. Webb, "Mystery of the Mummies: An Update on the Joseph Smith Collection," *Religious Studies Center Newsletter* 20, no. 2 (2005): 1–5; and Brian Smith, "A Book of Abraham Research Update," *BYU Religious Studies Center Newsletter*, May 1997, 5–8.

23 See Jay M. Todd, *Saga of the Book of Abraham*, 298–300.

had given some of his papyri, a collection of mounted fragments,²⁴ to his housekeeper, whose daughter inherited them and whose son eventually sold them to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.²⁵

In 1967 an Egyptian scholar at the University of Utah who specialized in Coptic, the latest phase of the Egyptian language, was doing research in the Metropolitan Museum. While going through the part of their collection that was not on display, he happened upon the papyri that Joseph Smith owned. He also recognized their connection with Mormons. Because he knew some prominent Mormons, he agreed to act as a go-between for the museum. Soon the museum gave the ten fragments they had to the First Presidency as a gift.²⁶ Afterward, an intense study of what is now known as the Joseph Smith Papyri began. Studies of the papyri and associated manuscripts were first done by men like Hugh Nibley, John Wilson, and Klaus Baer.²⁷ More recent work has

24 On the mounting of the fragments, see Alex Baugh and Kerry Muhlestein, “Preserving the Joseph Smith Papyri Fragments: What Can We Learn from the Paper on Which the Papyri Were Mounted?” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013), 66–83.

25 Albin Huesser to Ludlow Bull, 30 July 1946, as in Harold B. Lee Library Special Collections.

26 Thomas Hoving to N. Eldon Tanner, 1 November 1967, as in Harold B. Lee Library Special Collections. Also, H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham*, 236; John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 9.

27 Nibley was the first to recognize the Egyptian text, and to investigate it at length. See Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed., Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005), which is an updated version of his original work published by Deseret Book in 1975. Other early translations include Richard A. Parker, “The Book of Breathings (Fragment 1, the ‘Sensen’ Text, with Restorations from Louvre Papyrus 3284),” in *Dialogue* 8/2 (1968); this is only a translation of JSP I, or fragment one, of the Joseph Smith Papyri; and Klaus Baer, “The Breathing Permit of Hôr: A Translation of the Apparent Source of the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue* 3, no. 3 (1968). Later translations include Robert K. Ritner, “The ‘Breathing Permit of Hôr’ Thirty-Four Years Later,” *Dialogue* 33, no. 4 (2000); and Robert K. Ritner, “The ‘Breathing Permit of Hôr’ among the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 62, no. 3 (2003); this is not really two translations but basically a reproduction of the same translation twice with slightly different commentary and prologue. For a review of these articles, see Larry E. Morris, “The Book of Abraham: Ask the Right Questions and Keep on Looking,” *The FARMS Review of Books on The Book of Mormon* 16, no. 2 (2004). Also See Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*, Studies in the Book of Abraham 2, ed. John Gee (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002). I reviewed this and Ritner’s translation in “The Book of Breathings in Its Place,” with Translation and

been done by scholars such as myself, Robert Ritner, Michael Marquardt, Brian Hauglid, John Thompson, Brian Smith, H. Donl Peterson, Michael Rhodes, and especially John Gee, who has done more research into the Book of Abraham than anyone else.²⁸

Investigations About the Source of the Book of Abraham

When the papyri resurfaced in 1967, one of the fragments contained the drawing that was the original source of Facsimile One. This papyrus drew the most immediate interest. Because we can now translate Egyptian, it seemed that perhaps observers could then test Joseph Smith's revelatory abilities. Many members of the LDS Church *assumed* the text on the papyri that surrounded the original of Facsimile One was the source of the Book of Abraham. It was thought this might give them the chance to demonstrate Joseph Smith's prophetic abilities. Anti-Mormons also *assumed* the text adjacent to that drawing was the source of the Book of Abraham and were excited about the opportunity to disprove Joseph Smith's prophetic abilities.²⁹ Sadly, neither of these groups took the time to carefully and rigorously examine their assumptions. Thus, when the text was translated, and we learned that it was a somewhat common Egyptian document called the Book of Breathings (intended to help the deceased achieve the desired afterlife),³⁰ many felt that they could now demonstrate that Joseph Smith was not an inspired translator. From that time until the present, most non-believers who have written about the Book of Abraham have focused on either this issue or questions regarding the facsimiles.

In a recent statement the Church has said "the relationship between those [papyrus] fragments and the text we have today is largely a matter

Transliteration Analysis Appendix, a Book Review of Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*, in *The FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005), 471–486. As is noted below, Ritner came out with another translation a few years later.

28 Even before the resurfacing of the papyri, men like Jay Todd did a lot of research on the nineteenth century history of the papyri. See Jay M. Todd, *The Saga of the Book of Abraham*.

29 See Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Case Against Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1968), 2:159, 3:330. An example of Latter-day Saint ideas is found in Hugh Nibley, "A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price," *Improvement Era*, January 1968.

30 On this, see, Jean-Claude Goyon, *Rituels funéraires de l'ancienne Égypte* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1972); and Marc Coenen, "Books of Breathings; More Than a Terminological Question," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 26 (1995).

of conjecture.”³¹ Despite this, most who have written about the papyri, even until today, do not realize they have made an *assumption* about the source of the Book of Abraham. For them it is a given that Joseph Smith translated the text adjacent to Facsimile One when he was dictating the Book of Abraham to his scribe.³² They do not even realize that this is an assumption that should be evaluated. Though there is some fair reasoning behind this assumption, it remains an assumption and does not move into the realm of theory if it is not explicitly acknowledged as such and tested. Ironically, failing to realize one has made such an assumption causes one to think that solid proof has been found when in reality any conclusions reached are fully unreliable.³³ It is not surprising that such an assumption was made. It is natural to presume that the

31 LDS Gospel Topics, Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham, <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>.

32 To be clear, some have made this assumption and tried to bolster it based on Egyptian characters written in the earliest Book of Abraham manuscripts, which will be discussed below.

33 As I have noted elsewhere, there are many examples of research that pursues unquestioned assumptions, such as Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 16; Grant S. Heward and Jerald Tanner, “The Source of the Book of Abraham Identified,” *Dialogue* 3 (Summer 1968): 92–98; Edward H. Ashment, “Reducing Dissonance: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study,” in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990); Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, “Solving the Mystery of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *The Salt Lake City Messenger*, September 1992. Wesley P. Walters, “Joseph Smith Among the Egyptians: An Examination of the Source of Joseph Smith’s Book of Abraham,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16 (1973), 25–45, especially 33; and Charles M. Larson, *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992), 199–226, 151. Another example is Robert K. Ritner’s later translation of the papyri, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri, a Complete Edition* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), 3. Therein Ritner states that the Book of Abraham comes from JSP I and the record of Joseph from JSP II and III. This is stated as fact without any acknowledgment, or seeming awareness, that there are other possibilities. Ritner does excellent work on translating the papyri but does not address the fact that this translation is relevant only to the Book of Abraham if his assumption about the source of the Book of Abraham is correct. It is important to note that Ritner, who does not claim to be an expert in LDS church history, probably relied on a chapter in his book by H. Michael Marquardt, “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papers: A History.” Marquardt also makes this assumption and fails to ask the questions that would test the assumption. He makes a number of other assumptions without acknowledging that they are such or that there are alternative ways to interpret the evidence. See especially pp. 16, 17, 24, 25, 29, 32, 34, 35, 48, and 49.

text surrounding a picture has something to do with the picture. The problem is not in making this assumption, since research cannot move forward without a hypothesis, but rather is in failing to take the next necessary step: testing that hypothesis. To emphasize this important point, unnoticed or untested theories are not hypotheses but are instead presumptions. Once the presumption has been made, the next step should be to examine whether or not we have evidence that could support or discredit the conjecture.

Recently, I have tried to test this particular assumption (i.e., that the text surrounding Facsimile One is related to the illustration) in a number of ways. First, I have examined the text itself to see if it contains any clues about its relationship with its associated pictures. I have also examined similar papyri from the same period to see if the texts and their vignettes (illustrations) were typically adjacent to each other, something that has been done more extensively by others. Additionally, I have analyzed the accounts of eyewitnesses who saw the papyri and knew from what material Joseph Smith said he was translating.³⁴ I have also examined the earliest Book of Abraham manuscripts in a search for evidence, which will be discussed below. While more full reports of these examinations are or will soon be available elsewhere, a short summary is in order here.³⁵

The text of the Book of Abraham does make reference to a picture. It says the fashion (or drawing) of the altar and idolatrous gods is “at the beginning,” presumably of the record or papyrus on which the text was written. The first time this statement is clearly said is Abraham 1:12. Believing Latter-day Saints often assume that this line drawing attention to the vignette must be part of the earliest manuscript, but it is not entirely clear that this must be the case. The earliest attestation of the text of the Book of Abraham is a manuscript that is a second or third generation

34 Many have examined eyewitness accounts of those who saw the papyri. The most substantive evaluation of the value of such accounts is in John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, Richard Lloyd Anderson, Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 175–218.

35 On the first two points, see John Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *FARMS Review*, 20, no. 1 (2008): 113–137; Kerry Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham,” in *The Religious Educator* 11/1 (2010): 90–106; “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper*, ed. Robert L. Millett (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 217–241.

copy of the original dictation of the text.³⁶ In this manuscript part of the statement referring the reader to see a depiction of the altar at the “commencement” of the record is inserted between the lines of the text, suggesting that it may have been added as an afterthought.³⁷ However, the second mention of the drawing (Abraham 1:14) appears as part of the normal flow of the text.³⁸ While it is possible that the interlinear text indicates this is a later addition, that conclusion is less likely. The manuscript on which the line about the vignette was added does not actually have any drawings on it. It would not make sense to create a reference to a picture for a manuscript that does not have a picture on it. Rather, it seems more likely that the line about the picture had been accidentally left out and was re-inserted above the line. Moreover, the reference to the drawing that occurs just two verses later does not appear to be a later addition. The reference could not refer to the way it was printed in the *Times and Seasons* publication because that took place in 1842, and the text in question appears in 1835. Taken together, these bits of evidence suggest that the reference to the altar “at the beginning” is a line from the translation of the papyrus, though we cannot be certain. If this is true the reference to the “beginning” indicates that the vignette depicting the altar and idols is not adjacent to the text but some distance from it — at the beginning.

The line about seeing the representation at the beginning of the text is 540 English words into the text of the Book of Abraham. The Egyptian text in question is read right to left, with about two inches of text on the right-hand side of the vignette and several inches of it on the left-hand side. On a papyrus with hieroglyphs, this would have been only a few inches in, close enough to any vignette for no need to refer the reader “to the beginning.” For example, on JSP I, X, and XI (the fragments of papyri that contain the text adjacent to the Sacrifice of Abraham Vignette), 540 English words of translation are about five inches into the text. Because about two inches are on one side of the vignette, this would make the line in question, if it were translated from that papyrus, or if Joseph Smith thought or pretended he was translating from that text, about three

36 Brian M. Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 7. For an example of research done on the earliest manuscripts of the Book of Abraham, see Brent L. Metcalfe, “The Curious Textual History of ‘Egyptus’ the Wife of Ham,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 34/2 (2014), 1–11.

37 See Hauglid, *Textual History*, 27 n. 47, 68–71.

38 Ibid.

inches away from the vignette, placing it so close to the vignette that one would not refer to it as being at “the commencement” or “beginning.” If Joseph Smith were translating using something akin to the “Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar,” which suggests many English words be translated for each Egyptian character, the line about “the beginning” would have been right next to the vignette. The reference to a picture at the beginning makes the most sense if it is situated further from the text than one to three inches. Thus, our first line of questioning, that of examining what the text says about its relationship to the drawing, leads away from the common assumption and points towards the text and vignette not being adjacent to one another.³⁹

Others have examined other papyri created at about the same time as those which Joseph Smith owned.⁴⁰ Frequently pictures on these papyri are not adjacent to the text with which they are associated.⁴¹ Again we see that whereas the assumption that the text and the vignette are adjacent is not necessarily wrong, it is not safe to make.

I have recently completed an extensive article which examines the eyewitnesses who saw the papyri and heard something about what Joseph

39 See Muhlestein, “A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” 225–26.

40 On the dating of the Joseph Smith Papyri, see Jan Quaegebeur, “Books of Thoth Belonging to Owners of Portraits? On Dating Later Hieratic Funerary Papyri,” in *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt*, ed. Morris L. Bierbrier (London: British Museum, 1997), 74; Marc Coenen, “The Dating of the Papyri Joseph Smith I, X, and XI, and Min Who Massacres His Enemies,” in *Egyptian Religion the Last Thousand Years, Part II. Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan-Quaegebeur*, Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems, eds. (Leuven, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 1103; Marc Coenen, “Horos, Prophet of Min Who Massacres His Enemies,” *Chronique d’Égypte* 74 (1999), 257–59, wherein he refined his dating further, and John Gee, “History of a Theban Priesthood,” in *Proceedings of “Et maintenant ne sont plus que des villages ...” Thèbesetarségion aux époques hellénistique, romaine et Byzantine* (Brussels, Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2008), 59–71.

41 See Malcolm Mosher, Jr., “The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead in the Late Period: A Study of Revisions Evident in Evolving Vignettes, and the Possible Chronological or Geographical Implications for Differing Versions of Vignettes,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1989), 1:53–54. On the topic of vignettes and attending texts containing incongruences, see Valérie Angenot, “Discordance entre texte et image. Deux exemples de l’Ancien et du Nouvel Empires,” *Göttinger Miszellen* 187 (2002): 11–21. See Marc Étienne, “*Livre des Morts au nom de Hor*,” in *La mort n’est pas une fin: Pratiques funéraires en Égypte d’Alexandre à Cléopâtre*, ed. Alain Charron (Arles: Musée de l’Arles antique, 2002), 145; Jean-Claude Goyon, *Le Papyrus du Louvre N. 3279* (Cairo: IFAO, 1966), 2; many personal communications.

Smith was translating from.⁴² This study concludes that the majority of people who saw the papyri and heard something about the source of the Book of Abraham did not specify whether that source was on the scrolls or the fragments, but about a dozen did. Based on the testimony of these eyewitness accounts, our only real historical evidence, it is clear that if the translations did indeed come from the papyri (an idea that is possible but not sure and to which we will return below), the long roll was the source of the Book of Abraham. While we cannot yet say what the source of the Book of Abraham is, we can say what it is not: according to the eyewitness accounts, it is not the text adjacent to Facsimile One. It is too early yet to tell how this evidence and argument will be received by the academic community.

Issues of Translation

Since he first claimed to acquire the Golden Plates, Joseph Smith's abilities to translate have been heatedly questioned. These questions also center on an initial assumption: whether or not Joseph Smith could translate by the gift and power of God. As noted above, those who assume or make a faith-based choice that Joseph Smith *did not* receive divine or supernatural aid when translating will not recognize any of his translation projects as valid. Joseph Smith did not claim to know any ancient languages during any of his translations. Thus, if he did not receive the divine aid he claimed, he could not translate at all, meaning all that he did was a hoax. In contrast, for those who assume or make the faith-based choice that Joseph Smith *did* receive divine aid, the question of translation takes on a completely different meaning. In recent years, more full explorations have taken place of what Joseph Smith meant when he spoke of translating.⁴³ This is particularly true of the Book of Abraham. Let us first examine theories that have attempted to explain

42 Muhlestein, "Papyri and Presumptions," *Journal of Mormon History*, forthcoming. Before my extensive analysis John Gee had already come to this conclusion. See John Gee, "Formulas and Faith," *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*, 21/1 (2012): 61, 64–65.

43 For example, see Royal Skousen's many works on the translation of the Book of Mormon; Michael H. MacKay, *From Darkness Unto Light: Joseph Smith and The Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2015); Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011); or Kent P. Jackson, "Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: 1830," in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer*, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson, eds. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2010).

the translation process in light of the assumption that Joseph Smith *did not* receive divine aid while translating. Then we will examine those that assume he did.

Most who believe that Joseph Smith was uninspired when translating have held to the theory that he created an Egyptian grammar and then used it to translate the Book of Abraham. Subscribers to this theory usually marshal support for their hypothesis by pointing to data from the earliest manuscripts of the Book of Abraham, recently edited and published by Brian Hauglid,⁴⁴ and to a group of documents usually referred to as the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar, which will soon be published by Hauglid and Robin Jensen. In order to understand their argument, we must first know something of these documents.

Joseph Smith and his scribes left behind some sheets of paper they called a Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language (GAEL) that contain various Egyptian characters alongside explanations of those characters. Several of these explanations are similar to language in the Book of Abraham. A few somewhat similar documents bear different titles but contain similar or at least related information. Together all these papers are often called the Kirtland Egyptian Papers. Joseph Smith and his colleagues also created a few copies of the text of the Book of Abraham that have some Egyptian characters in the margin.⁴⁵ The latter characters seem to come from the fragments of papyrus that contain Facsimile One (JSP I, X, and XI). Some have postulated that Joseph Smith used the GAEL to translate these characters, which were taken from JSP I, and that this was both the source of the Book of Abraham and the method of its translation.

As we look at the GAEL, it is clear that Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and W. W. Phelps were products of their time when it came to their knowledge of Egyptian.⁴⁶ In the early nineteenth century, the language was in the process of being deciphered by Champollion and others, but most people thought Egyptian was a cryptic language, each character conveying varied meanings based on the amount of knowledge

44 Hauglid, *Textual History*.

45 On these manuscripts, besides Hauglid's *Textual History*, see also Brian M. Hauglid, "Thoughts on the Book of Abraham," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper*, 242–53.

46 See W. W. Phelps, "Reflections for the Fourth of July, 1834," *Evening and the Morning Star* 2/22 (July 1834), 173; and Samuel Brown, "The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps," *Journal of Mormon History* 34/1 (Winter 2008), 35.

possessed by the reader.⁴⁷ It was only after Egyptologists gained the ability to translate Egyptian using conventional methods that this notion about the language was dispelled. It seems that Joseph Smith and his colleagues were, like others before them, hoping to figure out several levels or layers of meaning for each Egyptian symbol.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, they failed, producing a document (GAEL) that makes little sense, which is not surprising, considering none of the authors claimed to know or understand Egyptian, and the translation of Egyptian characters had stumped scholars for centuries.

It seems there are two ways to assess the theory that the Prophet and his colleagues used the GAEL to translate characters from JSP I and thus produce the Book of Abraham. The first is to examine the accounts of eyewitnesses who knew something about what Joseph Smith was claiming to translate. We have already discussed this and have come to the conclusion that the historical documents strongly suggest this theory is problematic since he was not translating from JSP I.

The second way to assess this theory is to look at the correspondence between the Egyptian characters in the margins of the Book of Abraham manuscripts and see if they correspond to the way such characters are used in the GAEL. I have recently begun working on this and can report on the first phase of this research. First, I located all of the phrases in the GAEL that also appear in the Book of Abraham. I then compared the Egyptian characters next to those phrases in the GAEL to the Egyptian characters adjacent to the matching lines in the early Book of Abraham manuscripts. Of the twenty-one times I found text in the GAEL that matched text in the Book of Abraham, I found only one time that the corresponding Egyptian characters matched, four times when part of the characters matched, and sixteen times in which there was no match whatsoever. This indicates that the GAEL was not used to translate the papyri, nor is there any demonstrable translation relationship between the characters in the papyri we currently have and the text of the Book of Abraham. We cannot yet understand what the relationship between the GAEL and the papyri is, though there surely was one, yet we can tell

47 On the state of understanding Egyptian at this period, see Gee, "Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt," 427–28.

48 On how Joseph Smith did or did not fit in with others of his day in his views of Abraham, see Andrew H. Hedges, "A Wanderer in a Strange Land: Abraham in America, 1800–1850," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, Studies in the Book of Abraham 3, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 175–88.

that this is not how the Book of Abraham was translated. We do not yet know how proponents of the GAEL as the tool of translation theory will respond to this data.

Additionally, recently Brian Hauglid has carefully examined the Egyptian language documents created by Joseph Smith and his compatriots. He has concluded that the Prophet and others, especially W. W. Phelps, were engaged in a project to discover ancient languages even before the arrival of the papyri. William Schryver pointed this out even earlier in a Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR) lecture.⁴⁹ When the Egyptian Antiquities were acquired, Smith and Cowdery seem to have gotten involved for a short time in this Phelps project, but it was clearly Phelps driven throughout.⁵⁰ It is clear that having access to the papyri somewhat changed Phelps's focus and method, but Hauglid maintains it is clear that the GAEL is a continuation of work already begun.⁵¹ This would suggest that the GAEL was not the method of translating the Book of Abraham but rather that the papyri were seen as an aid in a process of understanding ancient languages that was already underway.

Furthermore, though somewhat contradictory to Hauglid's claims, John Gee has demonstrated that key portions of the GAEL date to early 1836 at the earliest.⁵² This is significant because most if not all of the translation of the Book of Abraham took place in late 1835. Thus the GAEL could not have been used as a method of translation. Furthermore, Gee has argued that Joseph Smith was not working on the Egyptian project during 1836, again indicating that the GAEL was largely Phelps's work.⁵³ At this point several avenues of investigation all come to the same

49 William Schryver, "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," 2010 FAIR Conference, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2010-fair-conference/2010-the-meaning-of-the-kirtland-egyptian-papers-part-i>. See also Gee, "Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt," 440.

50 See Gee, "Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt," 440–441; see a somewhat contra view in Samuel Brown, "Joseph (Smith) in Egypt: Babel, Hieroglyphs, and the Pure Language of Eden," *Church History* 78:1 (March 2009), 29–30.

51 Brian M. Hauglid, "The Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project, 'A Knowledge of Hidden Languages,'" Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds. *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2015), 476–77, 502.

52 Gee, "Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt," 440–41.

53 *Ibid.*, 441. Gee and I have independently reached the same conclusion that Joseph Smith came to regard the GAEL as an important effort, one that had failed but was worth trying again.

conclusion: whatever GAEL was, it was not the method of translating the Book of Abraham.

For those who believe that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham by inspiration, the most likely explanation of all this is that having translated by inspiration, Joseph Smith and his colleagues, primarily W. W. Phelps, tried to look at the Egyptian characters they had in front of them and, based on an inspired translation, create a grammar that would produce the ability to translate Egyptian without divine aid. This would have allowed men like W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery to also translate Egyptian. As just outlined, the evidence makes it clear that they were not looking at the text surrounding Facsimile One when they did so. The evidence also makes clear they failed in their fledgling academic attempt and gave up on it.

Recently an alternative theory has been put forward. In a FAIR conference in August of 2010, William Schryver made an important and cogent presentation arguing that the GAEL was actually W.W. Phelps's attempt to encode, or cipher, ideas into Egyptian characters.⁵⁴ The idea is intriguing and should be further explored but as yet has not gained a great deal of traction.

For those who do not believe Joseph Smith made an inspired translation, the most likely explanation, given the current evidence, is that Joseph Smith thought he could look at Egyptian characters and, from his own head, come up with a grammar the world would accept as a valid method of translating Egyptian. This group will also conclude that the attempt was a failure and was abandoned.

On the other hand, since the GAEL was clearly not Joseph Smith's tool for translation, for those who have chosen to believe Joseph Smith could receive divine aid in translating, we must examine what his translation method may have been. Most in this group have assumed that Joseph Smith translated text from the papyri. Recently many, including myself, have questioned if we are safe in making such an assumption.⁵⁵ This is because we have questions about how Joseph Smith "translated." For most people, the idea of translating is fairly straightforward. Conventionally, when someone translates, he reads a document in one language he understands and renders it into another language he understands. This

54 Schryver, "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," 2010 FAIR Conference.

55 Personal communications.

is not necessarily how Joseph Smith used the word “translate,” as is evidenced when examining his various translation efforts.⁵⁶

Joseph Smith’s first translation project was the Book of Mormon. There is much about the Book of Mormon translation process that we do not know. We know that the Prophet used the seer stones we call the Urim and Thummim as well as another seer stone.⁵⁷ While we cannot nail down the exact details, it seems he often was not looking at the gold plates at all during much of this process. What we can be sure of is that Joseph Smith provided us with a translation of a language he did not know, frequently without referring to the physical text he had, into a language that he did know. He explained that his ability to translate was a gift from God.⁵⁸

The next translation project took place while Joseph Smith was in the midst of finishing the Book of Mormon translation. Joseph Smith says that as he and Oliver Cowdery asked a question, he was shown in vision a parchment written on by John (see D&C 7). Again, it was written in a language Joseph Smith did not understand. This time he never even saw the physical text — he saw it only in vision, and it is not clear whether or not he ever saw the words written on the parchment. Either way, it does not appear that he received an inspired translation as he studied the text or looked at the words, but rather the translation seems to have somehow come to him either as or after he saw the text in vision. We know nothing about the translation process in this case.

Joseph Smith’s next translation project had very little to do with what most people call “translating.” He looked at an English version of the Bible and provided us with another English version but included material not present in the text he was translating from. Latter-day Saints often call this the “Joseph Smith Translation” of the Bible. In this case it is clear the text came to him as pure revelation and was not dependent at all on the physical text in front of him. This process began about two months after Joseph Smith finished translating the Book of Mormon.⁵⁹

56 This idea is also put forward in the Church’s statement, “Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>.

57 For more on this, see Richard E. Turley, Jr., Robin S. Jensen, Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign*, October 2015.

58 On all of this, see Michael MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat, *From Darkness Unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Religious Studies Center, 2015).

59 Kent P. Jackson, “New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” in *By Study and by Faith: Selections from the Religious Educator*, ed. Richard

The next translation project was the Book of Abraham. While some of Joseph Smith's confidants later spoke of his using the Urim and Thummim while translating,⁶⁰ the exact nature of this process is also unclear. There is no doubt that the translation was spurred on by the physical possession of the papyri. He certainly did not know the original language the text was written in, whatever that language was. It is also clear that Joseph Smith and many of the Saints spoke of the writings of Abraham as being on the papyrus, intimating that the process may have been similar to the translation of the gold plates. At the same time, some clues suggest that there was something of a revelatory process akin to the translation of the Bible.

For example, in Joseph Smith's journal it is recorded, "This afternoon labored on the Egyptian alphabet, in company with brsr O[liver] Cowdery and W[illiam] W. Phelps: The system of astronomy was unfolded."⁶¹ Most likely this refers to the Prophet's coming to understand the meaning of Facsimile Two or translating Abraham 3. Either way, the word "unfolded" suggests a revelatory experience that had little to do with what was on the papyrus. Additionally, his mother spoke of his ability to translate portions of the text not on the papyrus,⁶² also suggesting something of a revelatory process.

For those who have chosen to believe that Joseph Smith *could* translate with divine aid, based on the Prophet's translation history and the evidence we have, the most likely possible scenarios for the translation process seem to be: 1) by the power of God, Joseph Smith translated a text that was written on the papyri which we no longer have because it was burned in the Great Chicago Fire; 2) as he opened his mind to God because of his curiosity about the text on the papyrus, he received revelation about an ancient text written by Abraham and translated it by the power of God, though that text was not on any papyri he physically possessed; or 3) a combination of the two, meaning that he translated something on the papyri and received revelation regarding

Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009).

60 At this point, they referred to the Prophet's other seer stone as a Urim and Thummim. See Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal 2*, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1984), 155.

61 Dean C. Jesse, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals Volume 1* (2008), 67.

62 "M," *Friends' Weekly Intelligencer*; vol. 3, no. 27, October 7, 1846, 211; William S. West, *A Few Interesting Facts Respecting the Rise and Progress and Pretensions of the Mormons* (1837), 5.

other writings as well. Each of these theories is subscribed to by some LDS scholars.⁶³

Issues Involving the Facsimiles

The last topic we will examine here is the treatment given the Book of Abraham facsimiles and their explanations over the years. The earliest attacks on the Book of Abraham came from questions about the Facsimiles. As will be seen below, these examinations all pursued what is probably the wrong avenue of exploration. As early as 1873, anti-Mormons contacted Egyptologist Theodule Deveria, from the Louvre, and then published his interpretation of the meanings of the Facsimiles, which differed from Joseph Smith's. Later, in 1912, an Episcopal bishop in Salt Lake City sent copies of the facsimiles to eight Egyptologists, asking for their reaction. They all had different interpretations than Joseph Smith's, and Spaulding published these in his book *Joseph Smith, Jr. as a Translator* in an attempt to discredit Joseph Smith. Latter-day Saints such as John A. Widtsoe provided vigorous defenses, pointing out the methodological and assumption problems that undergirded the entire effort.⁶⁴ Since that time similar arguments have continued to take place, though by now our knowledge of both the facsimiles and Egyptian funerary art in general have advanced significantly. Recently a number of Latter-day Saints have pointed out how well Joseph Smith's explanations often do match what Egyptians or Egyptologists would say as well as pointing out some unique elements about the facsimiles. This will be discussed below.

The question that Spaulding, Deveria, and many others today have asked is about how Joseph Smith's explanations of the facsimiles compares to those of ancient Egyptians. The question is more complex than it initially appears, and many have opted for simple answers instead of investigating the complexities.⁶⁵ Here we will not be able to go in depth

63 Personal Communication. Additionally, these are outlined in "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>.

64 See the February and April 1913 issues of *The Improvement Era*.

65 For work on the interpretations of the facsimiles that were later than those of Deveria's or Spaulding's day but earlier than current scholarship, see Hugh Nibley, "The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Response," *Sunstone* December (1979); and Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1981). John Gee is currently working on what will be the most comprehensive study of the facsimiles to date.

into these issues, but we can at least highlight some of the questions to be considered.⁶⁶

Even though it is obvious to ask whether or not Joseph Smith's explanations⁶⁷ of the facsimiles match those of Egyptologists, it is not necessarily the right question to ask; we do not know if Joseph Smith was trying to tell us what ancient Egyptians would have thought of these drawings. What if Abraham's descendants took Egyptian cultural elements and applied their own meanings to them? We know this happened in other cases.⁶⁸ For example, Jesus himself did this when he gave the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, which clearly draws from the Egyptian tale of Setne-Kamwas. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* and *Testament of Abraham* are two more examples of Semitic adaptations of Egyptian religious traditions.⁶⁹ Therefore, maybe we should not be looking at what Egyptians thought the facsimiles meant at all but rather at how ancient Jews would have interpreted them. Sadly there is not enough information available to fully establish patterns for such Jewish reinterpretations.

Or perhaps Joseph Smith was providing an interpretation that a small group of Egyptian priests who were familiar with Abraham would have seen in this vignette. We know that from about the same time and place as when and where the Joseph Smith Papyri were created, there were priests very familiar with Abraham, who used him in their own

66 On studying the facsimiles, see John Gee, "A Method for Studying the Facsimiles," *The FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 347–53; and Michael D. Rhodes, "Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles," *The Religious Educator*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2003, 115–23.

67 While we cannot be certain the Prophet authored the explanations, at the very least it is clear he was part of the process and that he editorially approved of them. It seems most likely he was responsible for them, and in this article we will proceed based on that assumption.

68 See Kevin L. Barney, "The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid. (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University, 2005), 107–30. Also see Kerry Muhlestein, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus One," in *The Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013), 20–33.

69 See Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation"; Jared W. Ludlow, "Reinterpretation of the Judgment Scene in the Testament of Abraham," in *Proceedings of the Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation and Reinterpretation*, ed. John Gee and Kerry Muhlestein (Oxford, UK: British Archaeological Reports, 2012), 99–104; and Jared W. Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death: Narrative Humor in the Testament of Abraham* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

religious texts and rituals.⁷⁰ This group of priests could easily have altered a drawing they were familiar with in order to fit their specific textual needs, and thus those priests would interpret that drawing differently than other Egyptians. How can we be sure that this is not the case we are dealing with here? We cannot know, but it is certainly plausible.

It is also possible that Joseph Smith was providing the spiritual interpretation needed in modern times, regardless of how any ancient people would have viewed this document. While Joseph Smith clearly conceived of a connection between his explanations and the ideas of the ancient world, he too may not have been fully aware of the complex issues underlying his own assumptions.⁷¹

Considering all of the above possibilities, it seems quite possible that we are not justified in trying to compare Smith's interpretations with those of ancient Egyptians, though this is the litmus test usually applied by many who have written about the Book of Abraham. This is understandable: it is the only group we have enough information about to which we can make a comparison. Or is even that true?

Typically when people have asked what the Egyptians would say these drawings meant and how this compares with what Joseph Smith said they meant, they actually end up comparing Joseph Smith's explanations to what modern Egyptologists say the drawings mean. This is understandable because we do not have access to any ancient Egyptians, and we assume modern Egyptologists are reliable replacements. However, we also know that we Egyptologists are often wrong regarding what Egyptians would have said on the subject. One study demonstrated that in the few instances where we have found Egyptian labels about various figures in hypocephali (the type of drawing that Facsimile Two is), they often do not match what Egyptologists have said.⁷² It can thus be problematic to look to modern Egyptologists for what ancient

70 Kerry Muhlestein, "Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion," in the proceedings of *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology*, ed. Galina, A. Belova (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012), 246–59, and Muhlestein, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus One." See also John Gee, "The Structure of Lamp Divination," *Acts of the Seventh International Conference of Demotic Studies*, Kim Ryholt, ed. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002), 212–13.

71 See Muhlestein, "Joseph Smith and Egyptian Artifacts."

72 John Gee, "Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali," *Le lotus qui sort du terre*: *Mélanges offerts à Edith Varga*, Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts Supplément-2001 (Budapest: Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts, 2001), 325–34; Muhlestein, "Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham," 98.

Egyptians would have said various drawings represented. Therefore, such comparisons should not be the basis for any conclusions reached regarding larger issues, and these conclusions must be tentative.

If modern scholarship is to understand more fully the vignettes of the Joseph Smith Papyri that were made into the facsimiles in the published Book of Abraham, we must look more carefully at the culture from which the papyri came. The papyri were created in a day of internationalization in Egypt when the Egyptians were living among a great number of Greeks and Jews.⁷³ Each of these cultures borrowed from each other. The Greeks created gods and cultic practices heavily influenced by the Egyptians.⁷⁴ The Egyptians in turn borrowed from both the Jews and the Greeks in their religious and cultic practices and representations,⁷⁵ and many Jews were similarly influenced by the Greeks and Egyptians.⁷⁶ All these cultures saw their ways of understanding and representing their own religious beliefs as changing and evolving due to the pastiche of religio-cultural identity they were melding into. As a result, we find curious uses of foreign religious ideas and identities manifesting themselves in each of these cultures' religious practices and traditions. This impacts the possible interpretations of the facsimiles.

To illustrate, let us look at some possible scenarios for the facsimiles. As already mentioned, we know that some Jews were using foreign representations in their own way.⁷⁷ Besides those already mentioned, let us look at their later use of the zodiac. In a few synagogues, such as those at Beit Alpha and Sepphoris, a mosaic of a zodiac was incorporated into the floor of the synagogue. Clearly it could not carry with it the full meaning

73 See, for example, *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyes to Constantine and Beyond*, ed. Janet H. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Thomas Schneider, "Foreign Egypt: Egyptology and the Concept of Cultural Appropriation," in *Ägypten und Levante* 13 (2003): 160–61.

74 The cult of Serapis is demonstrative of this. Also see Shanna Kennedy-Quigley, "Ptolemaic Translation and Representation: The Hellenistic Sculptural Program of the Memphite Sarapieion," in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation and Reinterpretation*, ed. John Gee and Kerry Muhlestein (Oxford, UK: British Archaeological Reports, 2012), 87–98.

75 Muhlestein, "Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion;" Muhlestein, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus One;" and Gee, "The Structure of Lamp Divination."

76 See Erich Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, Berkeley, 1998; Ludlow, "Reinterpretation of the Judgment Scene in the Testament of Abraham"; Muhlestein, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I."

77 See Barney, "The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources."

it would have had in Greek culture and still be compatible with the strict monotheism of Judaism. Thus we must conclude that the Jews who created or worshipped in these synagogues were using representations from the cultures around them but applying and understanding them in their own unique way.

Applying this same concept to the Book of Abraham, could Joseph Smith's explanations of the facsimiles all represent a Jewish way of understanding Egyptian style drawings? Should we expect that at least some of the large number of Jews in Egypt adopted the Egyptian depictions around them and used them in their own way? Would we not actually be shocked if this did not happen? These are questions that must be further investigated if we are to better understand issues surrounding the facsimiles.

As noted above, some Egyptians used their typical religious rituals but inserted Jewish, Greek, Mesopotamian, and other religious elements into these rituals, texts, and spells, thus slightly altering and adapting their ritual and textual representations.⁷⁸ In order to expand our understanding, we must ask if we would expect them to do the same with their religious pictorial representations. Would we not be surprised if they hadn't? At this point it seems probable there are some typical Egyptian religious representations to which at least some Egyptian priests assigned a non-traditional meaning as they incorporated foreign religious elements into all parts of their religious practice. Such a conclusion invalidates the arguments of those who maintain that something like Facsimile One cannot represent something other than the traditional Egyptological interpretation. Scholarship has not yet seen a response to this line of questions.

Still, because it is the question that has been most often asked, we will investigate what happens when we do compare the facsimiles with other Egyptian drawings. For example, many have said that Facsimile One is a common funerary scene because it shares some elements in common with funerary art. It is, however, different in many respects. It is also clearly not a scene commonly associated with the Book of Breathing. There are actually no other instances of this scene being adjacent to the Book of Breathing (the kind of document that Facsimile One is adjacent to), though some continually insist that it is, regardless of research.⁷⁹ This vignette is fairly unique.

78 See Muhlestein, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I."

79 Muhlestein, "Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham," 99–100.

The closest iconographic parallels are some similar scenes at the temple of Denderah. One of these scenes is accompanied by a caption that reads that the goddess Bastet had commanded those who followed her to “slaughter your enemies,”⁸⁰ which means that the closest iconographic match to Facsimile One also matches what the scene is supposed to be about in the Book of Abraham, namely that someone in the scene was in danger and received protection.⁸¹ Other comparable scenes at the Denderah Temple depict Anubis and the sons of Horus defending someone from his adversaries, or list Shesmu, a god associated with human sacrifice, as being part of the scene. They also describe being hacked to pieces, burned, or sent to the slaughterhouse.⁸² While I am not certain that the scenes at Denderah are *true* parallels of Facsimile One, for those who want to compare that drawing to its *closest* parallels, we find that these parallels are associated with sacrificial elements similar to Joseph’s interpretation of this facsimile. This fact has been left out of most discussions about the facsimiles.

Recent LDS scholarship has argued that there are more elements that make Joseph Smith’s interpretation of Facsimile One plausible. The story of Abraham’s actions and his near sacrifice by a priest associated with Egypt have long caused pause among people who did not believe the Egyptians practiced human sacrifice. However, recent scholarship has concluded that they did.⁸³ These same lines of research have also

80 Text in Sylvie Cauville, *Le temple de Dendara: les chapellesosiriennes vol. x* (Cairo: French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, 1997), 232. My gratitude to John Gee for pointing out this and other instances and for doing most of the work of translation. Translation was done in a group of interested scholars who met to read Egyptian texts. John Gee led this group.

81 Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham,” 99–100; “A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” 232–34.

82 See John Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *FARMS Review*, 20/1 (2008), 120.

83 Kerry Muhlestein, *Violence in the Service of Order: the Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt*. *British Archaeological Reports International Series 2299* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011); and Kerry Muhlestein, “Royal Executions: Evidence Bearing on the Subject of Sanctioned Killing in the Middle Kingdom,” in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 15/2 (2008). Also “Death by Water: The Role of Water in Ancient Egypt’s Treatment of Enemies and Juridical Process,” in *L’Acqua Nell’anticoEgitto: Vita, Rigenerazione, Incantesimo, Medicamento*, ed. Alessia Amenta, Michela Luiselli, and Maria Novella Sordi (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2005), 173–79. As for public presentations, both national and international in nature, see Kerry Muhlestein, “Smashing, Stomping and Spitting: The Protection of Egypt Through the Execration Ritual,” lecture, Society

suggested that the situations that prompted such action align perfectly with the story presented in the Book of Abraham and Facsimile One.⁸⁴ A surprising amount of Egyptological parallels with Joseph Smith's explanations of Facsimile Two have also been found.⁸⁵

None of this is to suggest that such parallels prove that Joseph Smith was inspired; they cannot do so. They do, however, make such a belief plausible, an argument that has become increasingly important among many Latter-day Saints.⁸⁶ Furthermore, many Latter-day Saints maintain that knowledge of Joseph Smith's inspiration can come only through personal and spiritual revelation. For Latter-day Saints, this is

for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities Annual Scholars Colloquium, Royal Ontario Museum and University of Toronto, November 2007; Kerry Muhlestein, "Smiting, Smashing, Sailing, and Sacrifice: The Evolution and Manifestations of Some Violent Rituals in Ancient Egypt," lecture, American Research Center in Egypt, North Texas Chapter, July 2007; Kerry Muhlestein, "Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt," presentation, ARCE Conference, Toledo, April, 2007; Kerry Muhlestein, "The Persistent Question of Human Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt: Was It Real and Unperceived?," presentation, ARCE Conference, New Jersey, April 2006; Kerry Muhlestein, "The Smiting Scene Referent Reconsidered," presentation ARCE Conference, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 2005; and Kerry Muhlestein, "Death by Water: the Use of Water in Ancient Egypt's Treatment of Enemies and Juridical Process," presentation, First International Conference for Young Egyptologists: Water in Ancient Egypt: Life, Regeneration, Incantation, and Medical Prescription, Chianciano Terme, Italy, October 2003. See also Kerry Muhlestein, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22.1 (2013): 20–33; and Kerry Muhlestein, "Egyptian Papyrus and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful Egyptological Point of View." 216–43.

84 Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee, "Egyptian Middle Kingdom Contexts for Human Sacrifice" in *Journal of Book of Mormon and other Restoration Scripture* 2/2, 2011, 70–77; Muhlestein, "Egyptian Papyrus and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful Egyptological Point of View," 216–43. Robert Ritner, in a Signature Book website posting, has posited that the research has not demonstrated that preaching against the worship of gods would constitute grounds for sacrifice. In doing so, Ritner pointed out where Muhlestein's arguments had not been tied together as tightly as they should have been. The ideas are more clearly presented in Kerry Muhlestein, "Sacred Violence: When Ancient Egyptian Punishment was Dressed in Ritual Trappings," *Near Eastern Archaeology*, 78/4, (2015), 229–35.

85 Michael D. Rhodes, "The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus — Seventeen Years Later," (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994); Gee, "Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyrus," 136.

86 See, for example, John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, "Historical Plausibility: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study," in *The Historicity of the Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 63–98.

a valid epistemological exercise that yields trustworthy results. Their critics take a differing viewpoint regarding the validity of revelation as a source of knowledge.

Another note regarding Facsimile Three is in order. It has received the least amount of scholarly study and attention,⁸⁷ and thus it has the least debate associated with it. As with the other two facsimiles, some have highlighted incongruences between Egyptological interpretations and Joseph Smith's explanations as evidence for disbelief in Joseph Smith, and these are similarly based on unsupported assumptions about the Prophet's intentions, as has been discussed above.

There is a key difference with Facsimile Three compared to the other two: the explanations for Facsimile Three label some of the hieroglyphs above the heads of the figures differently than the way I would translate them as an Egyptologist. As an LDS Egyptologist, it seems to me that the most likely explanation for this is that Joseph Smith was teaching either how ancient Jews or a small set of ancient Egyptians would have *interpreted* the drawings or how we should *interpret* them, after which he then *assumed* that the glyphs would *translate* that way. Again, Joseph Smith did not claim to be able to read hieroglyphs. This particular issue has not yet received much scholarly attention.

We do know that this type of drawing was associated with Abraham by Egyptians.⁸⁸ This is also true of Facsimiles Two,⁸⁹ just as we have found ancient Egyptians associating drawings similar to Facsimile One with Abraham.⁹⁰ Most LDS scholars who have pointed out these things have not argued that they prove that Joseph Smith was correct but instead that they demonstrate plausibility.

A note regarding the connection between Abraham and the kind of drawing that is on Facsimile One is also in order. In past publications

87 John Gee, "Facsimile 3 and the Book of the Dead 125," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, John Gee and Brian Hauglid, eds. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 95–106.

88 John Gee, "A New Look at the *ankh p' by* Formula," in *Proceedings of IXe Congroes International des Études Démotiques*, Paris, 31 août - 3 septembre 2005, Ghislaine Widmer et Didier Devauchelle, eds. (Cairo: Institut Français Archéologie Orientale, 2009), 133–44.

89 See Rhodes, "Hypocephalus."

90 See John Gee, "Research and Perspectives: Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts," *Ensign*, (July 1992), 60–62; and John Gee, "References to Abraham Found in Two Egyptian Texts," *Insights: An Ancient Window* (September 1991): 1, 3.

and other forums⁹¹ I have not been as clear about the connection as I should have been. I have misstated that the text of a particular papyrus said that it was Abraham on top of a lion couch, a scene that is similar to that on Facsimile One. However, the text did not say it was Abraham on top of the lion couch. Instead, Abraham's name was written underneath the lion couch scene, and the spell concludes with the formulaic phrase that the text above was to accompany the picture. This means that, while we cannot be sure what the association between Abraham and the lion couch scene was, there was an intended association.⁹² The association of a lion couch with Abraham, whatever the nature of the association, is the point here. Clearly some Egyptians eventually saw a connection between the Jewish Patriarch and a scene somewhat similar to Facsimile One, just as they did with drawings similar to Facsimiles Two and Three.⁹³

For some believing scholars, this leads to one of the most striking points. While, as noted above, the culture at the time of the creation of the papyri fragments was such that we should expect many Egyptian religious representations to be correlated to Jewish religious elements, we should not expect that every Egyptian religious representation would be. Yet each of the three Egyptian representations Joseph Smith said were associated with Abraham actually was associated with him by ancient Egyptians. The odds of Joseph Smith's guessing this three times and being proved right in each case are unrealistically small. While this does not prove Joseph Smith to be a prophet, no other explanation has yet accounted for this fact. Critics who have pointed out understandable inconsistencies with Smith's explanations have not attempted to deal with this and other significant instances of consistency. The number of consistencies that can be found between the Book of Abraham and the ancient world are far too numerous to list here,⁹⁴ and those who

91 See Kerry Muhlestein, "Abraham, Isaac, and Orisirs-Michael," and Kerry Muhlestein, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I."

92 I am grateful to John Gee for helping me to see my imprecision and to rectify it. See his articles on the subject cited above. See also John Gee, "Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 19–85.

93 While quite a bit of work, as noted above, has been done on Facsimiles One and Two, very little has been done on Facsimile Three. For a pertinent and important study, see John Gee, "Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, Studies in the Book of Abraham 3, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 95–105.

94 Besides those already noted in this article, for just a few more examples see an Egyptianism in the Book of Abraham text as pointed out by John Gee, "Joseph

believe that Joseph Smith was not inspired have done little to deal with or explain these consistencies. Further work to create a methodology for assessing such congruencies needs to be pursued by both believing and nonbelieving scholars in order to better assess Joseph Smith's work on the Book of Abraham.

Conclusion

While there are many more small issues and sets of data that could be discussed regarding the history of the study of the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri, we have touched at least briefly on the major issues here. Due to the resurfacing of the papyri Joseph Smith once owned, the last few decades have been an intense period of research regarding these issues. Historical and Egyptological understandings have advanced, and some of the points of debate have clarified as a result.

The discussion has been moved forward recently by an important statement issued online by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, called "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham."⁹⁵ This has allowed for a more clear understanding of the position of the Church regarding the relationship of the papyri fragments and the text, as has been noted above.

Perhaps the most important recent movement in Book of Abraham studies is the trend toward being more aware of and forthright about the assumptions that have formed the basis for academic discussions. While all have known that their point of view about the possibility of

Smith and Ancient Egypt," 442; the numerous consistencies listed in *Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham*, John Tvedtnes, Brian Hauglid, and John Gee, eds. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001); Jeffery R. Chadwick, "The Book of Abraham in the Light of Ancient History" in *A Symposium on the Old Testament*, Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 1983; Brian Hauglid, "The Book of Abraham and Muslim Tradition," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, Studies in the Book of Abraham 3, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 131–46; Brian Hauglid, "On the Early Life of Abraham: Biblical and Qur'anic Intertextuality and the Anticipation of Muhammad," in *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*. Symposium Series, John C. Reeves, ed. (Society of Biblical Literature & E. J. Brill, 2003), 87–105; John Gee, "Notes on the Sons of Horus" (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991); John Gee, "Has Olishem Been Discovered?" *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/2 (2013): 104–107; and Kerry Muhlestein, "The Explanation Defying Book of Abraham," in *Anchored in Truth: Faithful Answers to Sincere Questions*, Laura H. Hales, ed. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2016), 87–88.

95 <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>.

Joseph Smith's inspiration impacts their research, being upfront about it allows for a more transparent and thus useful and intellectually honed conversation. Similarly, recognizing key assumptions made about comparing explanations of the facsimiles to Egyptological points of view or about the source of the Book of Abraham allows us to better research and understand the issues. Hopefully future scholarship will more explicitly incorporate transparency about assumptions into their studies. Furthermore, hopefully discussions about epistemology and personal revelation as a source of learning about Joseph Smith and his papyri will be part of the conversation, for even though different camps will have different points of view on this issue, clarity about how it plays into the conversation is extremely relevant and will further understanding.

It is also clear that more research needs to be done. This is especially true in regard to understanding the role of the Grammar of the Egyptian Alphabet and Language, nuances of Joseph Smith's methods of inspiration and translation, and understanding Facsimile Three. Undoubtedly the next decade will see a continuation of research about the Joseph Smith Papyri and the Book of Abraham, hopefully revealing both new information and better processing the old.

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