

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Book of Abraham

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The Book of Abraham is found in the LDS book of “scripture,” *The Pearl of Great Price*, and is one of the standard works of the Mormon church. It is introduced as follows in its preface:

Translated from the papyrus, by Joseph Smith: A Translation of some ancient Records, that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt—The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus. [See *History of the Church*, vol. 2, pp. 235, 236, 348–51.]

In going to the referenced pages of the *History*, you will discover that Joseph Smith reported that on July 3, 1835, “Mr. Michael H. Chandler came to Kirtland to exhibit some Egyptian mummies. There were four human figures, together with some two or more rolls of papyrus covered with hieroglyphic figures and devices.” (p. 235).

Smith stated that he was able to translate some of the figures and was given a certificate of proof of that by Mr. Chandler (dated July 6, 1835) and that:

Soon after this, some of the Saints at Kirtland purchased the mummies and papyrus, a description of which will appear hereafter, and with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy, found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, etc.—a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them. Truly we can say, the Lord is beginning to reveal the abundance of peace and truth (p. 236).

Bruce McConkie reported on it as follows:

Book of Abraham—This work was translated by the Prophet from a papyrus record taken from the catacombs of Egypt, a record preserved by the Lord to come forth in this day of restoration (Milton R. Hunter, *Pearl of Great Price Commentary*, pp. 6–35). Abraham was the original author, and the scriptural account contains priceless information about the gospel, preexistence, the nature of Deity, the

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creation, and priesthood, information which is not otherwise available in any other revelation now extant (*Mormon Doctrine*, p. 564).

Fawn Brodie, in *No Man Knows My History*, reported:

“Joseph told Josiah Quincy in 1844 that his mother purchased them with her own money at a cost of Six Thousand dollars,” although he wrote in his journal that they had been bought by some of the Saints in Kirtland (p. 170).

The prophet never deciphered that papyrus which told the story of Joseph in Egypt, contenting himself with a translation of the writings of Abraham (p. 171).

For Mr. Chandler to give the “prophet” a certificate proving he had correctly translated the papyri was something of a miracle since the documents were all but indecipherable to the rest of the scholarly world. The breakthrough in translating Egyptian hieroglyphics did not come until 1837, when Champollion’s work with the Rosetta stone was published in England (p. 170, footnote *). In fact, the prophet “translated” it any way he wanted to, and in 1835 America there wasn’t anyone who could argue the point.

This episode should have provided a golden opportunity to prove Joseph Smith’s office of prophet, seer, and revelator, but it didn’t. By the time information became available on a less spiritual form of translation, Joseph was long gone from the scene. It wasn’t until 1861 that his less-than-accurate translation was questioned, when a Frenchman named Jules Remy published an expose of the Book of Abraham in a book entitled *A Journey to Great Salt Lake* (Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* p. 175).

The papyri escaped further study for quite some time, and it was generally believed that they had been burned in the Chicago fire. But in 1967, 11 fragments of the papyri were discovered in the New York Museum of Art, some bearing the actual handwriting of Joseph Smith. They were soon turned over to the LDS church. Here was the chance to prove to the whole world, once and for all, that Joseph Smith was a real prophet of God and Mormonism was the true and only kingdom of God on earth. Yet what surfaced was a confirmation of Remy’s earlier claim that the scrolls were simple funeral documents found by the thousands all over Egypt (*ibid* p. 175).

It is obvious that the Book of Abraham is of extreme importance because, true or false, it is the only LDS scripture that teaches some of the church’s most non-orthodox beliefs. If genuine, it would be the earliest Jewish/Christian scriptural writing known to man. Yet, in spite of clear, unbiased scholarly tests that prove the Book of Abraham to be a complete fraud, the valiant, faithful members of the church continue to prefer to take the word of their prophet over valid scholarship.

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It is interesting to look at what LDS scholars themselves say the matter. Hugh Nibley's epic book *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* is a case in point. In Reading the book and going back to the Book of Abraham, the reader will be astonished to find little to no correspondence between the way Joseph Smith had translated the text and the actual meaning of the Egyptian characters. The reproductions of facsimiles One through Three, found with the Book of Abraham in the *Pearl of Great Price*, are prime examples of gross misinterpretations given by Smith in his fable.

When Dr. Nibley examined the recovered papyri in 1967, he admitted that “the papyrus scripts given to the Church *do not prove* the Book of Abraham is true” (from an article in the Brigham Young University newspaper, *The Daily Universe*, December 1, 1967). That was the understatement of the year.

His book did such a poor job in trying to defend Joseph Smith's “translation” that the church has been unwilling to endorse it, even though it is published by Deseret Publishing.

In fact, Francis Gibbs (then secretary to the First Presidency) wrote the Baptist minister to Mormons, John L. Smith, and stated, “The writings of Dr. Hugh Nibley concerning the papyri scrolls have been done entirely on his own responsibility, and *do not have the official approval and sanction of the church*” (copy of letter on file: Utah State University Library—Special Collections #210).

In 1976, Nibley asked fellow LDS Egyptologist Dee Jay Nelson (who claimed to have a Ph.D.) to help translate the scrolls. Nelson concluded that Joseph *didn't get one character right* on the whole scroll, and that it had nothing to do with Abraham, but was a funeral text!

Although Mormon scholars originally stated that Nelson's “competence in both Egyptian and Semitic languages is unquestioned” (Richley H. Crapo, *Book of Abraham Symposium*, April 30, 1970, p. 271), it later developed that Nelson's doctorate was from a diploma mill in Seattle. When this was discovered. Mormon apologists tried to make a lot of mileage out of the fact that Nelson was “discredited.” Yet although Nelson's academic credentials were discredited, his translation of the papyrus was not. In fact, it was said to be quite excellent!

The *Ogden Standard Examiner* investigated the controversy surrounding Nelson's credentials and competence. It contacted the leading U.S. expert on Egyptology, Dr. Klaus Baer of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute. Dr. Baer was quoted as saying that although Nelson had no formal training in Egyptology, “he had certainly learned

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Egyptian somewhere" (*Ogden Standard Examiner*, March 29, 1980, article by Charles F. Trentelman).

He described Nelson as "having a good amateur knowledge of Egyptian. He can translate hieroglyphics, but not without error. ... As to the papyri in question, Nelson's translation is 'essentially' correct" (*ibid.*).

That means that Joseph Smith's "translation" is essentially incorrect. Dr. Baer provided his own translation of the papyri, which was published in the "liberal" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Autumn 1968, pp. 119–20). Although too lengthy to quote here, it concluded that the papyri bears no resemblance to Smith's Book of Abraham.

Another Egyptologist, Dr. Richard A. Parker of Brown University, also published his translation, which almost totally agrees with Dr. Baer's and which bears zero resemblance to the Book of Abraham (Autumn 1968, pp. 119–20).

Both scholars' translations comprise only about 75 words. Compare that to Smith's Book of Abraham: It has thousands of words. Joseph somehow milked dozens of words out of a single Egyptian character. For example, one character in the papyri which resembles a backwards "E" is "translated" by Smith as Abraham 1:13–14. There are 76 words in those verses alone, including nine proper names and eight other nouns (Decker, *The Massive Mormon Scripture Mess*, Issaquah, WA: Saints Alive, 1987, p. 20).

This isn't an unusual example. Abraham 1:16–19 contains 177 words that Joseph Smith "translated from a single character that represented the name of an Egyptian god named *Khonso*.

In all the years since the papyri came to light, not one LDS defender has been able to explain how Joseph Smith managed to derive the Book of Abraham from a 70-plus-word pagan funeral text. Clearly, Smith knew nothing of Egyptian and obviously had no divine help in translating the papyri. The Book of Abraham is a fraudulent work and it bears strong testimony to the deep spiritual blindness and foolishness of the LDS people, a basically intelligent people who cannot allow themselves to look at reality in such a matter of faith.¹

¹ Decker, E. (1995). In *Decker's Complete handbook on Mormonism* (pp. 101–105). Harvest House.