

# THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

## INTRODUCTION

### HISTORY

In the summer of 1835, a traveling antiquities showman named Michael Chandler rode into the growing Latter-day Saint community of Kirtland, Ohio. In his possession was a collection of Egyptian mummies and papyrus scrolls. After exhibiting the antiquities to Joseph Smith on July 3, 1835, the Prophet determined that one of the scrolls contained the writings of Abraham and another, the writings of Joseph of Egypt. He subsequently purchased at least four or five papyrus documents and four mummies from Chandler for the sum of \$2,400 and set about efforts to translate the records. Precisely how Joseph translated the papyri is unknown. Contemporary sources indicate that the Prophet translated the record by divine revelation (a few mention the Urim and Thummim in connection with the translation) but do not offer more specific details.

The successive migrations of the Latter-day Saints from Ohio to Missouri and then to Illinois in the late 1830s halted work on the book of Abraham. During this time, Joseph Smith expressed his desire to continue translating the Egyptian records but was unable to because of pressing church and civic duties. He was finally able to prepare a publishable version of the book of Abraham in early 1842. The text and three accompanying facsimiles first appeared serially for a public readership in Nauvoo, Illinois, in the *Times and Seasons* between March 1 and May 16, 1842. Later that year, the text (and the first facsimile) was republished in the *Millennial Star* in England for British Latter-day Saints under the editorial supervision of Apostle Parley P. Pratt. Nine years later, in 1851, the book of Abraham was included in the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price and has appeared in each subsequent edition of the book.

After his death in 1844, Joseph Smith's collection of papyri and mummies transferred to various individuals (including his mother, Lucy Mack

Smith, and his widow Emma Hale Smith), with part of it eventually ending up in the Wood's Museum in Chicago, Illinois, in the mid-nineteenth century. This portion of the collection is presumed lost to the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Another portion of the collection, however, had found its way to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. This quantity, including the original papyrus fragment of Facsimile 1, was returned to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in November 1967. Since then, the known extant fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri have remained in the custody of the Church in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Associated with the translation of the book of Abraham is a collection of manuscripts (a portion of one in the handwriting of Joseph Smith, but most in the handwriting of clerks such as Oliver Cowdery and William W. Phelps) sometimes called the Kirtland Egyptian Papers. The documents appear to reflect mental effort on the part of their creators to interact with the text of the book of Abraham. Some of the papers also appear to show efforts to decipher characters from the Egyptian papyri and created a systematized grammar of the Egyptian language. The exact nature of these documents—including the extent of Joseph Smith's involvement in their creation and their relationship to the English text of the book of Abraham—remains uncertain as scholars continue to probe their meaning and significance. Although these documents perhaps offer a glimpse into the mental efforts undertaken in the unfolding revelatory process in the production of the book of Abraham (compare Doctrine and Covenants 9:8), to what extent the documents possess or were intended to convey any revealed truths is ultimately unknown. They were a collaborative work in progress and have never been formally accepted among Latter-day Saints as revealed knowledge or binding scripture.

The surviving papyri fragments have been translated by both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint Egyptologists and do not contain any of the text of the book of Abraham. Instead, they contain copies of ancient Egyptian funerary texts known today as the Book of Breathings and the Book of Dead. The relationship between the revealed English text of the book of Abraham and the papyri fragments is a matter of ongoing investigation, with different theories having been offered over the years to account for this incongruence. While some have argued that the text of the book of Abraham was contained on a portion of papyri no longer extant, others have viewed the text as the result of the papyri catalyzing Joseph Smith's revelatory insights on the life and teachings of Abraham. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accommodates either of these views and does not take an official position on the translation of the book of Abraham other than to say it was accomplished by divine inspiration (something Joseph Smith and others who assisted him in the translation of the text repeatedly affirmed).

## STRUCTURE

The book of Abraham is narrated in an autobiographical voice that is consonant in tone and style with Joseph Smith's other scriptural productions. Like the Book of Mormon, it purports to be a historical narrative, although it does contain poetic and literary elements such as parallelism and a brief soliloquy (Abraham 2:12–13). The text recounts scenes from the history of the eponymous biblical patriarch and offers a personalized glimpse into Abraham's life as he flees his idolatrous kinsfolk in his homeland of Ur of the Chaldees, enters a covenant with God, and beholds a spectacular vision of the cosmos and Creation.

Some of the content in the book parallels passages from the book of Genesis, most notably Genesis 12 (Abraham 2) and Genesis 1–2 (Abraham 4–5). But its opening act (chapter 1) and grand cosmology (chapter 3) have no biblical correlation. Unlike any other book of Latter-day Saint scripture, the book of Abraham is appended by three facsimiles which serve to visually illustrate the text's narrative (Facsimiles 1 and 3) and draw readers into its cosmology (Facsimile 2).

The text ends abruptly in the Garden of Eden with Adam naming the newly created animals. Textual elements (see 2:21) and Facsimile 3 suggest that the narrative was on track to have readers eventually witness Abraham in Egypt instructing Pharaoh's court in matters of astronomy (indeed, the very astronomy being annunciated in the text, as indicated at 3:15). Themes of priesthood, covenants, sacrifice, obedience, and Abraham's aptitude as a seer run throughout the extant narrative, suggesting that these elements too would have been prominent in the remainder of the account. Unfortunately, despite the explicitly stated intentions of Joseph Smith, no additional story content was published beyond what is extant. Some sources suggest that textual material beyond what appears in the published book of Abraham had been translated by the Prophet, but no such putative material was made available in print before his death on June 27, 1844.

Peppered throughout the text are clearly recognizable Hebrew words (see, for example, 3:13, 16, 18) that are undoubtedly the result of Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew under the tutelage of Joshua Seixas in the early months of 1836. Likewise, key phrases in the text's Creation account are rendered in ways that are more in harmony with the underlying Hebrew of the King James Version of Genesis 1–2 (for example, the choice of "expanse" over "firmament" at 4:6). These and other clues from the extant manuscripts suggest that the Prophet was actively and consciously involved in shaping the English translation of the book of Abraham and not merely a passive agent receiving and channeling a pre-rendered text. Without the ability to check the English text against any purported ancient Abrahamic manuscript, however, the precise nature of the translation of the book of Abraham

must remain in the realm of conjecture, and readers would be wise not to allow these and other unanswerable questions to diminish the power of the text's narrative or the profundity of its teachings.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR LATTER-DAY SAINTS

The most pronounced contribution of the book of Abraham to Latter-day Saint theology is undoubtedly what the text reveals about humankind's relationship to God in the premortal world. Although other books of Latter-day Saint scripture contain references to the concept of the premortality of humankind, it is Abraham's vision recorded at 3:22–28 that captures most clearly a picture of the eternal identity of God's children and their purpose here on earth. This cosmology is memorialized in the beloved hymn "If You Could Hie to Kolob," penned by William W. Phelps, who scribed for Joseph Smith during the text's translation process. Drawing from the book of Abraham's description of the great star or planet nearest to the throne or residence of God (see 3:3–10), the hymn evokes contemplative reverence for the grandeur of eternity and the human soul's yearning to progress back to its Father's presence, themes appropriately in harmony with Abraham's account.

Besides offering a depiction of the pre-mortal council, the book of Abraham significantly augments how Latter-day Saints understand the Abrahamic covenant. Elements missing in the Genesis account of Abraham's covenant with God (Genesis 17) but preserved at Abraham 2:6–11 include the central importance of priesthood in the Abrahamic covenant and the culminating blessings of eternal life. The book likewise expands how Latter-day Saints conceive of Creation since the text departs in numerous ways from the conventional readings of the Creation account contained in Genesis 1:1–2:4. For example, the book of Abraham refashions the "days" of Creation into "times," emphasizing the (apparently lengthy) periods of unfolding preparation in the process of the earth's creation (Abraham 4:1–5:3). The text likewise explicitly mentions the participation of multiple gods counselling together as they undertook Creation (4:1), a detail hinted at in the Genesis account (Genesis 1:26–27) but prominently narrated in the book of Abraham (for example, 4:26–27; 5:2–3).

The book of Abraham's portrait of the ancient world of the patriarch's day and its expansive cosmology have piqued the curiosity of generations of Latter-day Saint writers who have sought ways to make sense of this sometimes perplexing text. While much about the book of Abraham remains elusive—not the least being the precise relationship the translated text shares with the papyri scrolls obtained by the Prophet Joseph Smith—scholars have been able to piece together a plausible ancient context and setting for the book that makes it much more comprehensible and enriching. The text can (and should) also be appreciated for the role it played in shaping Joseph Smith's

teachings on such subjects as the eternity of spirit (3:18) and the participation of multiple divinities in organizing Creation (4:1). Whether the text is read in these contexts or not, there is no denying that this short book of only five chapters presents profound and important eternal truths from which Latter-day Saints greatly benefit.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviated designations for book of Abraham manuscripts used in this study edition follow Brian M. Hauglid, ed., *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010). They have been correlated with the designations used in Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian’s Press, 2018) and on the Joseph Smith Papers Project website.

Ab1 – Abraham Manuscript 1 Lines 1–21 on folio 1a of Ab4 (Abraham 1:1–3) W. W. Phelps (1835) = Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–C [Abraham 1:1–2:18]

Ab2 – Abraham Manuscript 2 (Abraham 1:4–2:6) Frederick G. Williams (1835) = Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–A [Abraham 1:4–2:6]

Ab3 – Abraham Manuscript 3 (Abraham 1:4–2:2) Warren Parrish (1835) = Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–B [Abraham 1:4–2:2]

Ab4 – Abraham Manuscript 4 begins at line 22 on folio 1 of Ab1 (Abraham 1:4–2:13) Warren Parrish (1835) = Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–C [Abraham 1:1–2:18]

Ab5 – Abraham Manuscript 5 (Abraham 1:1–2:18) Willard Richards (1842) = Book of Abraham Manuscript and Explanation to Accompany Facsimile 1, circa February 1842 [Abraham 1:1–2:18]

*T&S – Times and Seasons* (Abraham 1–5) = Book of Abraham and Facsimiles, 1 March–16 May 1842

*MS – Millennial Star* (Abraham 1–5), 3 July 1842–4 August 1842.