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Author(s): Michael D. Rhodes

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Abstract: Review of . . . *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri* (1992), by Charles M. Larson.



Charles M. Larson, . . . *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*. Grand Rapids: Institute for Religious Research, 1992. 240 pp., illustrated. \$11.95.

**The Book of Abraham:
Divinely Inspired Scripture**

Reviewed by Michael D. Rhodes

The book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price periodically comes under criticism by non-Mormons as a prime example of Joseph Smith's inability to translate ancient documents. The argument runs as follows: (1) We now have the papyri which Joseph Smith used to translate the book of Abraham (these are three of the papyri discovered in 1967 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and subsequently turned over to the Church; the papyri in question are Joseph Smith Papyri I, XI, and X). (2) Egyptologists have identified these three papyri as being the text of the *Book of Breathings*, an ancient Egyptian religious text. (3) A translation of the *Book of Breathings* shows that it is not the book of Abraham. (4) This proves that Joseph Smith could not translate Egyptian. (5) Therefore Joseph Smith was a false prophet, and the Church he founded also cannot be true. The book . . . *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*, by Charles M. Larson, is the most recent publication to take up this argument. These arguments are *not* valid. In fact there is a growing body of research that supports the authenticity of the book of Abraham, and I will cover some of the more important findings of this research.¹

The key point on which the above argument against the authenticity of the book of Abraham rests is whether the papyri

¹ Many thanks to John Gee for his invaluable assistance in the preparation of this review. However, I am *not* trying to prove that Joseph Smith was a true prophet—this knowledge should not, and indeed *cannot* come by scholarly means—it *must* come from God (James 1:5). To base one's testimony on the works of man is to build on a foundation of quicksand that is constantly shifting and changing. The only sure knowledge is that received from God through honest and humble prayer. In other words, if you want to know if the book of Abraham is true, read it with an open mind, then humbly ask God if it is true, and "he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 10:4-5).

we now have are indeed the very ones that Joseph Smith used in his translation of the book of Abraham. The evidence the critics use is that of the four manuscripts of the book of Abraham now in existence, three of them have characters taken from the *Book of Breathings* papyrus, apparently demonstrating that this is the text Joseph Smith used to translate it. The three manuscripts with the Egyptian characters in the margin are part of a collection of documents dating to the year 1835 and are known as "the Kirtland Egyptian Papers." Hugh Nibley has made an exhaustive study of these papers in *BYU Studies*.² I will just cover a couple of the most important points he makes in this article.

First of all, none of these manuscripts of the book of Abraham is in Joseph Smith's handwriting. They are mostly in the handwriting of William W. Phelps, with a few short sections written by Warren Parrish. Nowhere in the documents is Joseph Smith designated as the author. Moreover, the Egyptian characters in the left hand margin were clearly written in *after* the English text had been written. These cannot be the working papers of a translation process. Instead, Phelps and Parrish seemed to have copied down the text of the book of Abraham and were then attempting to correlate that translation with some of the scrolls in the Church's possession. These documents are most likely that preliminary stage of investigation and exploration the Lord prescribed in D&C 9:8 to "study it out in your mind." The Lord expects us to first do all we can to understand something (and in the process discover our own limitations) before we seek for direct revelation from him. This is what Phelps and Parrish were apparently doing, although their efforts were short-lived and unsuccessful. In fact these same men shortly after this began to turn away from the Prophet Joseph and fell into apostasy. If they had been parties to some fraudulent process of producing the book of Abraham, they would surely have denounced Joseph Smith for this, but they never did.

The papyri that the Church now has in its possession are clearly not all that Joseph Smith had. There is no reason to assume that any of those we now have is the original of the book of Abraham. In fact, there is good reason to think that we in fact do *not* have the original. In 1842, the fragments we now have

² Hugh Nibley, "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," *Brigham Young University Studies* 10 (Summer 1971): 350-99.

were described as being mounted in “a number of glazed slides, like picture frames, containing sheets of papyrus, with Egyptian inscriptions and hieroglyphics.”³ The next year, in 1843, Charlotte Haven, a nonmember, visited Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, and wrote a letter to her own mother about it, saying: “Then she [Mother Smith] turned to a long table, set her candlestick down, and opened *a long role of manuscript* [italics added], saying it was ‘the writing of Abraham and Isaac written in Hebrew and Sanskrit,’ and she read several minutes from it as if it were English.”⁴ Thus a contemporary source indicates that the scroll of the book of Abraham was *not* part of the papyri fragments now in the possession of the Church.

One of the major problems with all anti-Mormon efforts to disprove the divine origin of the book of Abraham is that they *never* look at the book of Abraham itself. They concentrate on showing that Joseph Smith’s method of translation (as they envision it) could not possibly have worked, and yet they completely ignore the evidence of the text itself. An analogous situation would be one in which some seemingly crackpot inventor, with not even a high school diploma, should announce that he had discovered a process for converting lead into gold. A large number of scholars and scientists would then come forward with detailed explanations showing how this process could never work, because it was not in accord with the laws of science—all the while refusing to test the gold this man produced to determine if it was in fact *real* gold. I’ll now turn my discussion to the “real gold” in the book of Abraham—the mounting internal evidence of its authenticity.

As before, I will limit my discussion to some of the most important findings. There has been a huge amount of evidence accumulated over the past fifteen years or so, and I can cover only a small part of it.

Many critics of the book of Abraham have claimed that there is no connection between Abraham and ancient Egyptian religious writings. Recent discoveries have shown rather the opposite. Two pseudepigraphic⁵ texts dealing with Abraham

³ Henry Caswall, “The Mormons,” *The Visitor or Monthly Instructor for 1842* (1842): 406.

⁴ Charlotte Haven to her mother, 19 February 1843, in “A girl’s letters from Nauvoo,” *The Overland Monthly*, second series, 16 (December 1890): 623-24.

⁵ The term “pseudepigrapha” refers to a large body of ancient Jewish and Christian religious writings that purported to be inspired

were discovered after Joseph Smith's time and shed some interesting light on the relationship between Abraham and the Egyptians. In the *Testament of Abraham*, Abraham is shown a vision of the Last Judgment that is unquestionably related to the judgment scene pictured in the 125th chapter of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*,⁶ one of the major religious texts of the ancient Egyptians. One of the Joseph Smith Papyri is in fact a drawing of this judgment scene. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* describes a vision Abraham saw while making a sacrifice to God. In this vision he is shown the plan of the universe, "what is in the heavens, on the earth, in the sea, and in the abyss."⁷ This is almost an exact translation of the Egyptian words in the left middle portion of Facsimile Number 2 of the book of Abraham (figures 9 and 10). He is shown "the fullness of the whole world and its circle," in a picture with two sides.⁸ This is a good description of the object depicted in Facsimile Number 2 (called a hypocephalus by Egyptologists). This document even describes the four animal-headed figures labeled number 6 in Facsimile Number 2.⁹ The significance of these two ancient documents is that they are roughly contemporary with the hypocephalus and the other Egyptian documents purchased by Joseph Smith—and they relate the same things about Abraham that Joseph Smith revealed to us in the book of Abraham and in his explanation of the hypocephalus. And, most important, they first came to light near the turn of this century—Joseph Smith could not have known about them.

There are also a number of other ancient Egyptian texts that contain references to Abraham, including a recently discovered

writings like the Bible but were never canonized. The books found in the Old Testament Apocrypha are examples of these kind of writings. D&C 91 is a revelation that Joseph Smith received about the Apocrypha, which states that they contain many things that are true, but also contain things which are not true that are interpolations by the hands of men. "And whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom; and whoso receiveth not the Spirit, cannot be benefited" (D&C 91:5-6).

⁶ *Testament of Abraham*, recension A, 12-13. For an English translation see James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 1:889-90.

⁷ *Apocalypse of Abraham* 12. For an English translation, see Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:694-95.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 18.

Egyptian lion couch scene like that of Facsimile Number 1 of the book of Abraham that explicitly mentions the name of Abraham.¹⁰ Anti-Mormon critics have been quick to point out the absurdity of associating Abraham with this pagan Egyptian scene, and yet now we have clear proof that this association is an ancient one. Again, these things have only been recently discovered, and Joseph Smith could not have known about them nor had access to them.

Another thing that anti-Mormon critics have scoffed at is the supposedly gibberish names used in the book of Abraham. The place name "Olishem" mentioned in Abraham 1:10 is a good example of this. And yet this name has now been found on a newly discovered inscription dating approximately to the time of Abraham.¹¹

Let's turn now to Facsimile Number 2, the hypocephalus, and compare Joseph Smith's interpretations of some of the figures with those of modern Egyptology.¹²

Figure 1. Joseph Smith says that this is "Kolob, signifying the first creation, nearest to the celestial, or the residence of God." To the ancient Egyptians, this was symbolic of God, endowed with the primeval creative force, seated at the center of the universe. The name Kolob is right at home in this context. The word most likely derives from the common Semitic root *QLB, which has the basic meaning of "heart, center, middle." In fact the Arabic form of this word, *qalb*, forms part of the Arabic names of several of the brightest stars in the sky including Antares, Regulus, and Canopus.

Also in his explanation of figure 1, Joseph Smith states that the Earth is called Jah-oh-eh by the Egyptians. The Egyptian word for the Earth is *sh.t*, which is approximately pronounced "yoh-heh".

¹⁰ John Gee, "Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts," *Ensign* 22 (July 1992): 60-62.

¹¹ John M. Lundquist, "Was Abraham at Ebla? A Cultural Background of the Book of Abraham," in Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, eds., *Studies in Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 225-37.

¹² For references and more details of the following discussion of Facsimile Number 2 see Michael D. Rhodes, "A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus," *Brigham Young University Studies* 17 (Spring 1977): 259-74. An updated version of this paper will soon be available from the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (F.A.R.M.S).



Facsimile 2 from the book of Abraham, redrawn by Michael Lyon on papyrus.

Figure 3. Joseph said this represented God, sitting on his throne clothed with power and authority; with a crown of eternal light on his head. The scepter which the figure holds in its hand represented to the Egyptians the power and authority of a god or king. The circular object on the figure's head is the Sun, which certainly qualifies as a crown of eternal light. The two large eyes located on either side of the seated figure are known as *wedjat*-eyes by the Egyptians and, among other things, represented the divine wisdom or intelligence by which God oversees and cares for all of his creations. It is not unreasonable to see in this "the grand key words of the priesthood" as Joseph Smith describes it. ("The glory of God is intelligence," D&C 93:36.)

Figure 4. Joseph Smith explains that this figure represents the expanse of the heavens, the revolutions of Kolob and

Obilish, and that it also signified the number 1,000. This is the hawk-god, Horus-Sokar. Horus was a personification of the sky, and Sokar was associated with the revolution of the Sun and other celestial bodies. Finally, the ship here shown is described in Egyptian texts as “ship of a thousand.” Joseph Smith hits it right on the mark.

Figure 6. Joseph Smith describes these four standing figures as representing “this earth in its four quarters.” These are the four Sons of Horus. They were the gods of the four quarters of the earth, and were also regarded as presiding over the four cardinal points.

These are representative of Joseph Smith’s interpretations of all three of the book of Abraham facsimiles. The majority are supported by our modern understanding of Egyptian culture and religion. Even the remaining explanations, although not directly confirmed, are in no case contradicted by what we know. This can hardly be dismissed as mere chance or lucky guessing. Joseph Smith simply could *not* have come up with this on his own—the knowledge of it was not even available to the best scholars of his time. He can only have received this knowledge from God, as he claimed. But the certain knowledge of Joseph Smith’s divine calling as a prophet comes not from scholarly proofs, but from the workings of the Holy Ghost upon the heart and mind of people willing to humble themselves and seek the Lord’s conformation of it in prayer. I have done that and can firmly and unshakably testify that I *know* beyond any shadow of doubt that Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet of God and that the book of Abraham is divinely inspired, as is the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the other parts of the Pearl of Great Price, which Joseph Smith revealed to us in these latter days.¹³

¹³ For further information on the book of Abraham, see Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), and Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975). See also the various articles on the book of Abraham in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.