

# A Tentative Approach to the Book of Abraham\*

*Richard P. Howard*

DURING THE 1830s, JOHN WHITMER WROTE, in connection with the ancient Egyptian records purchased by the church in July 1835 from Michael H. Chandler,

. . . Joseph the Seer saw these records and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records which gave an account of our forefathers. Much of which was written by Joseph of Egypt who was sold by his brethren. Which when all translated will be a pleasing history and of great value to the Saints.<sup>1</sup>

Oliver Cowdery described the papyri as “the Egyptian records, or rather the writings of Abraham and Joseph. . . .” He further observed:

The evidence is apparent upon the face, that they were written by persons acquainted with the history of the creation, the fall of man, and more or less of the correct ideas of notions of the Deity. The representations of the god-head—three, yet in one, is curiously drawn to give simply, though impressively, the writers views of that exalted personage. . . . The inner end of the same roll, (Joseph’s record,) presents a representation of the judgment: At

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\*This article, together with several others reflecting on the then recent discovery of the missing “Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri” (“source of the Book of Abraham”), first appeared in Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 1968): 88. Two years later, Howard published a more definitive essay on the Book of Abraham, entitled “The Book of Abraham in the Light of History and Egyptology” in *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action* (April 1970). This article was revised and expanded twice: “Joseph Smith, The Book of Abraham, and the Reorganized Church of the 1970s” (in *Saints Herald* 117, no. 10 [October 1970]: 28-31, no. 11 [November 1970]: 20-21, no.12 [December 1970]: 24-26); and “The Book of Abraham” (in Richard Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A study of Their Textual Development*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. [Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1995], 192-205).

1. John Whitmer, “The Book of John Whitmer Kept by Commandment,” MS, 76, in The Archives, Department of History, The Auditorium, Independence, Missouri.

one view you behold the Savior seated upon his throne, crowned, and holding the sceptres of righteousness and power, before whom also, are assembled the twelve tribes of Israel, the nations, languages and tongues of the earth, the kingdoms of the world over which satan is represented as reigning, . . . Be there little or much it must be an inestimable acquisition to our present scriptures, fulfilling, in a small degree the word of the prophet: For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph Smith Jr. concurred in Cowdery's estimate of the great spiritual value of these ancient documents and of their direct relationship to both Abraham and Joseph.

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 their 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.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly seven years later, in 1842, Joseph Smith Jr. published the result of his "translation" activity in these papyri, but in his introduction to the text he more conservatively cited the material as "*purporting to be the writings of Abraham*" (italics added).<sup>4</sup>

In July 1862, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints published the Book of Abraham in its monthly periodical with no editorial comment and without the introduction given it in 1842 by Joseph Smith.<sup>5</sup> Twenty-one months later, that same issue of the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* was reprinted, along with other back issues, and the publishers ran a small notice concerning the availability of the Book of Abraham by this means:

The Book of Abraham was published in the *Herald*, in No. I of Vol. 3. That number has been republished, and is now for sale. Price 10 cents.<sup>6</sup>

Thirty-two years later, two officials of the Reorganized Church published the following observation on the Book of Abraham:

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2. Oliver Cowdery, Kirtland, Ohio, to William Frye, Gilead, Illinois, letter dated 22 Dec. 1835, published in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 3 (Dec. 1835): 234-37.

3. "History of Joseph Smith," *Millennial Star* 15 (7 May 1853), 19:296.

4. *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 and 15 Mar., 16 May 1842), 9, 10, and 14:703-706; 719-22; 783-84.

5. *The True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 3 (July 1862), 1:1-10.

6. *The True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 5 (1 Apr. 1864), 7:112.

The church has never to our knowledge taken any action on this work, either to indorse or condemn, so it cannot be said to be a church publication; nor can the church be held to answer for the correctness of its teaching. Joseph Smith, as the translator, is committed of course to the correctness of the translation, but not necessarily to the indorsement of its historical or doctrinal contents.<sup>7</sup>

This conservative position stemmed from a knowledge of the doctrinal content and implications of same in the Book of Abraham, and has generally represented the sentiment of the Reorganized Church leaders and membership since that time.

However, several developments since 1896 indicate the need for a more definite, if tentative, statement on the part of the Reorganized Church. These developments seem to require forthright clarity in the direction of questioning the 1835-42 linguistic skill of Joseph Smith Jr. as a translator of ancient Egyptian symbols. This is true especially in the light of the fact that the contributions of the great pioneer Jean François Champollion (1790-1832), relating to the deciphering of the inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone and to ancient Egyptian philology generally, were not known in the western hemisphere sufficiently by 1842 so as to have helped Joseph Smith, or any other American, develop proficiency in this field. And while Joseph Smith's history mentions his 1836 classwork in Hebrew, he makes no mention of formal instruction in Egyptian, and alludes in this connection only to his preparation of an Egyptian alphabet and grammar. The basis for this work is not specified.

The first development was the publication of a pamphlet by the Episcopal Bishop of Utah in 1912,<sup>8</sup> based on the work of eight prominent Egyptologists, scattered from Chicago to Munich. Franklin Spalding had sent them copies of the three well-known facsimiles published along with the Book of Abraham by Joseph Smith in *Times and Seasons* in 1842. Spalding had requested each to interpret the symbols and comment upon the accuracy of the interpretations of them offered by Joseph Smith. The Egyptologists complied with Spalding's request and submitted their interpretations and appraisals. While they did not agree in every minute detail with each other, they were nonetheless unanimously at sharp variance with each of the twenty-five interpretations of the facsimiles published by Joseph Smith Jr. Therefore, since 1912 serious students of this subject have had to consider the probability that Joseph Smith had erred at many significant points in his interpretations of the

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7. Joseph Smith III and Herman C. Smith, *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Publishing House, 1896), 2:569.

8. F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Arrow Press, 1912).

drawings on the papyri, from part of which the text of the Book of Abraham itself was apparently derived. The implication of this is that if Joseph Smith erred in assessing the meanings of the papyri drawings, there is a strong likelihood that his interpretations of the ancient Egyptian language symbols on the papyri were inaccurate also.

A second development underscores this possibility: the publication in 1966 of a reproduction of a document known as Joseph Smith's "Alphabet and Grammar of the Egyptian Language." Until recently, this document was available to only a few scholars at the archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. However, Jerald Tanner of Salt Lake City managed to obtain a microfilm of this document and published enlarged prints from this film.<sup>9</sup> This reproduction, *if of an authentic original*, demonstrates significant connections between some words in it and identical words used by Joseph Smith in his interpretations accompanying the three facsimiles as published in 1842. It follows that if modern Egyptologists have or might yet clearly establish the inaccuracy of Joseph's interpretations of the three facsimiles, and if further research confirms the link already observed between Joseph's facsimile interpretations and his "Alphabet and Grammar of the Egyptian Language," then the reliability of the Book of Abraham as a translation of ancient records could no longer safely be maintained.

The third development has implications largely for the future. This is the widespread dissemination of splendid reproductions of the recently discovered eleven Egyptian papyri. At least two of these clearly relate to the Book of Abraham facsimiles first published by Joseph Smith. This relationship is all the more firmly established by the presence, among the papyri, of a certificate of sale of the papyri to Mr. A. Combs by L. C. Bidamon, Emma Smith Bidamon, and Joseph Smith III, dated May 26, 1856.<sup>10</sup> This certificate, both in content and in signatures, appears to be authentic. The significance of the distribution of these documents is that now more information than ever is available for Egyptologists' translation and further comparison with Joseph Smith's facsimiles and his "Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar." Should this occur, and should their translations of these ancient papyri be published, evidence of great consequence would then bear upon a fuller assessment of the relative merits of the Book of Abraham as representative of either his (Abraham's) writings or of writings about him.

If the present-day Egyptologists' work on these ancient papyri tends

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9. Modern Microfilm Company, *Joseph Smith's Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar* (Salt Lake City, 1966).

10. The full text of this certificate was published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 52n.

to confirm the conclusions of their 1912 predecessors, proponents of the Book of Abraham will be drawn to a revision of their present estimate of the meaning and nature of Joseph Smith's work on this publication. Indeed, one real possibility in that case would be that the Book of Abraham is not a translation at all, in the sense of transferring ideas from the Egyptian to the English language.

In the light of the findings of the 1912 Egyptologists, and depending upon whether their present-day successors will substantiate their conclusions, one may be confronted with the evidence that the Book of Abraham was rather the product of a highly intuitive mind, stimulated at least in part by an earlier work of revising the creation accounts of the Authorized Version of the Bible, 1830-33. Textual comparisons between Joseph Smith's "New Translation of the Bible" (or, "Inspired Version," as published by the Reorganized Church) and the Book of Abraham (Genesis 1 and 2: Abraham 4 and 5) show a remarkable degree of parallelism of subject materials, language style, and content. The major difference is the monotheism of the former and the polytheism of the latter. It should be recalled also that in 1842, when Joseph Smith published the Book of Abraham, his work of biblical revision had not yet been published.

There will be a natural tendency for some who are dogmatically committed to the Book of Abraham and/or to an image of Joseph Smith as an infallible living oracle to minimize or even to rule out completely the possibility of any relationship existing between the recently discovered papyri and the Book of Abraham as published. However, the unmistakable connection between these recently discovered papyri and the facsimiles published by Joseph Smith in 1842 leaves little room for such maneuvering and leads the open-minded observer away from such an alternative.

It appears that in time the mystery of the Book of Abraham will be unveiled. Meanwhile, it is significant for the Reorganized Church that undue haste and overzealous faith did not move it in the nineteenth century to canonize this work of Joseph Smith Jr. primarily on the basis that it was accomplished by Joseph Smith Jr.

## *The Trouble?*

When I first subscribed to *Dialogue* nearly a year ago, I was enthralled by the content and the attitude; I eagerly ordered all the cut-rate back issues available and read them over the next several months. My enthusiasm has been dampened, however, by a gradual realization: the dichotomy between “iron rods” and “liahonas” is not simply a difference of stance—whom we rely on to discern truth.

A dialogue-oriented person believes that the purest source of truth is the Holy Spirit speaking peace and logic to the soul. Such individuals therefore give the highest credibility to those truths personally known through testimony; all else has yet to be proved and is fair game for inquiry.

Latter-day Saint doctrine, however, ultimately requires a belief that the highest source of truth is those in authority. The only proper objects of inquiry, then, are things produced outside their purview. From this perspective, all of our dialogue, unfortunately, is perceived as “counseling the Brethren” or “steading the ark.”

Of course, most of us believe this dichotomy is not fundamental, merely stylistic, and that in time we will all grow toward a unity of the faith. Our hope springs (nearly) eternal on that point, in fact. Of late, however, I have begun to fear that the difference will not be reconciled, only minimized. I may never feel true unity with the body of the Saints.

Craig B. Wilson  
Coalinga, California  
from Vol. 24, No.3 (Fall 1991)

Mormonism is not like other religions. Mormonism claims to have a direct link to God. Either you believe that it does and follow the prophet without question or you don't believe it, in which case you should leave. People who join the Mormon church do so not because of its commitment to free thinking and intellectual honesty but because it offers answers to questions about which humanity feels generally insecure. They do not wish to have “intellectuals” raising questions about these answers or about the men who have claimed to have received these answers from the Almighty himself.

The entire foundation of Mormonism rests on the credibility of its prophet. If the prophet is not right on matters of doctrine, social matters, etc., then Mormonism is in no way a unique religion but simply another conglomerate of mens' opinions. This is Mormonism. I'm not sure what people expect from this religion. They want divine authority and a man to speak to God. Then they want to be able to disagree with God's decrees and remain in good standing. Either he speaks for God or he doesn't. It really is that simple.

Don't get me wrong. I agree with [authors who point out that] they as well as others have been abused. But the abuse is not an aberration; it is simply the logical progression of doctrine. When people believe that they are God's mouthpieces, this is the way they behave. Mormonism is by definition authoritarian and to a large extent totalitarian. If you don't like it, leave! I did.

Brian K. Dalton  
Downey, California  
from Vol. 26, No. 3 (Fall 1993)