

# What to Do with the Book of Abraham

Stake Education Class, 17 Jan 2019

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**Description:** The Book of Abraham was revealed to Joseph Smith between 1835 and 1842. It contains a brief account of some events in the life of the Biblical patriarch, including some very unique events. The source of the revelation was a set of Egyptian papyri that Joseph Smith and others purchased in the summer of 1835. Fragments from these papyri are in the possession of the Church today and have raised questions by some as to the nature of the Prophet's work with the text. This class addresses those questions and summarizes the research into the papyri, the history, and the message of the Book of Abraham.

## Introduction

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I am of the opinion that nothing has received more attention from the critics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints than the Book of Abraham. Many of those in the “ex-Mormon” discussions, blogs, videos, and the like point to their ‘discovery’ that the Book of Abraham was not what they had always been taught it was as the first or even main reason they left the Church. A blog I created on the Book of Abraham received more comments than any other, many from critics who wanted me to change my story to match their own beliefs (I deleted most of their comments but responded privately to all of them). All of this is caused by claims that Joseph Smith clearly made it all up because his translations can be refuted by modern scholars who now can read his papyri.

But the critics are shallow in their approach at best and dishonest at worst. Sadly, though, their critiques catch those unaware of the full story by surprise, and in many cases, they end up asking the wrong questions and drawing the wrong conclusions based on invalid assumptions and poor information. In my own studies, I have found the Book of Abraham to be an amazing piece of scripture that has all the marks of a true, ancient text. In this class, I will attempt to respond to the critics and show the fascinating nature of the text.

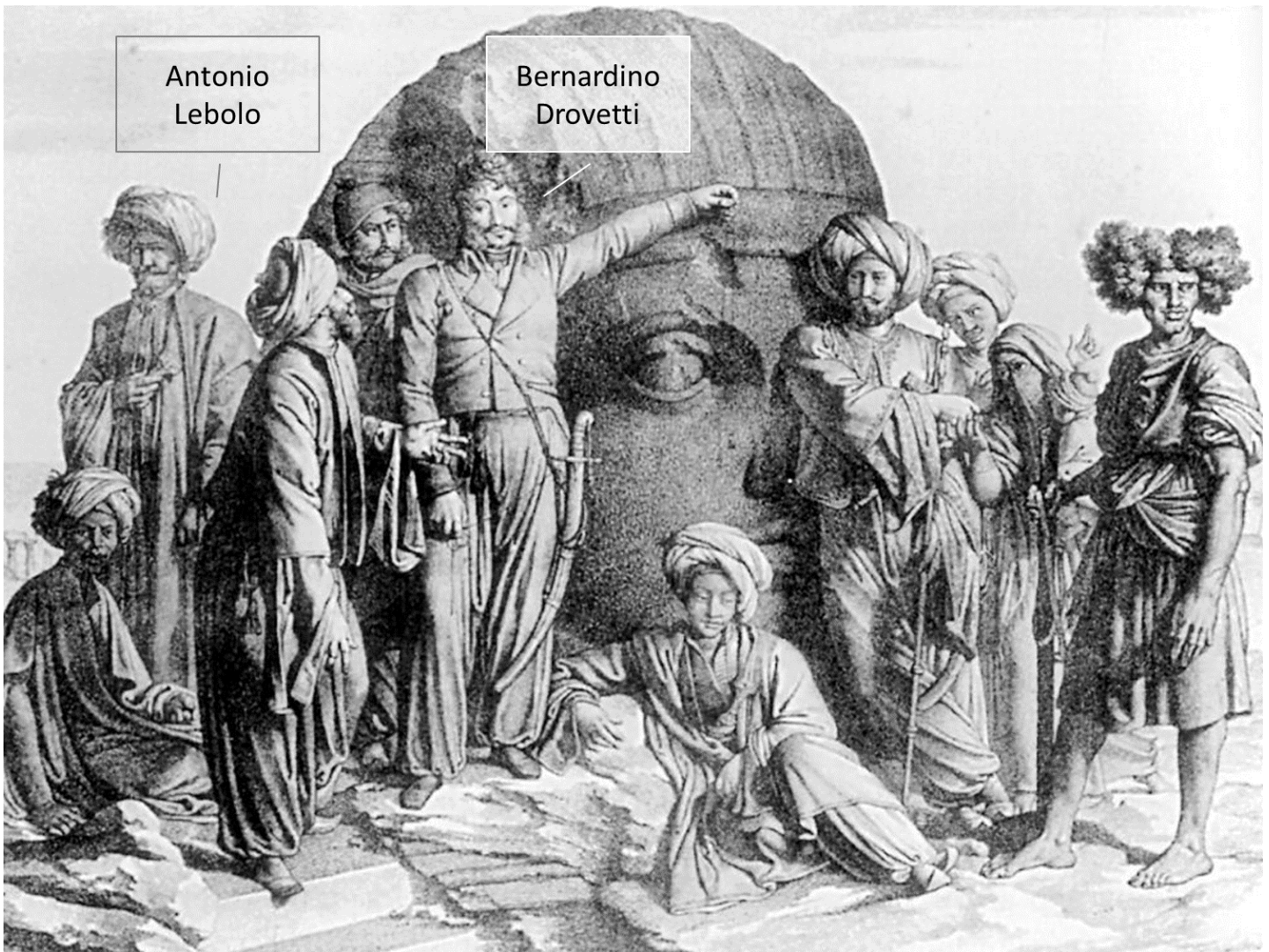
## The History of the Papyri and the Book

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### The Discovery and Story of the Papyri

What are these papyri? What do they have to do with the Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith? How did they end up at the Met? To answer these questions, we must go to Egypt in the late 18th century.

In 1796, Napoleon conquered a part of northern Italy called Sardinia. A young man of Castellamonte in Sardinia was named Antonio Lebolo. He was sixteen and newly married at this time. In 1798, Napoleon took thousands of troops, scientists, and explorers to Egypt, where they conquered the land, studied the history and culture, and plundered the tombs and monuments. They found the Rosetta stone, for example, which allowed scholars to eventually decipher the Egyptian language. One man, Bernardino Drovetti, was named the French consul in Alexandria, and took it was part of his mission to collect all he could and send it back to museums in France, while selling many other finds to enrich himself and those with him. This was the time when many of the museums in Europe received their Egyptian collections. Lebolo worked for Drovetti, plundering tombs and collecting antiquities. One of Lebolo's projects included some Ptolemaic-period tombs in Thebes (ancient Luxor). Drovetti told Lebolo to send at least some of these finds to America through an agent named Albano Oblasser. This included eleven mummies and several papyri rolls and fragments.



Who the initial buyers were is unknown, but eventually they ended up in the hands of Michael Chandler, who took them on the road to show them off and earn some money. Along the way, he sold most of the mummies. Hearing about Joseph Smith's interest in antiquities, he came to Kirtland in June 1835 and sought time with the Prophet. Joseph looked them over, showing much greater interest in the scrolls than the mummies, but Chandler was unwilling to sell the papyri without the mummies. With the assistance of other members in the area, Joseph purchased it all from Chandler for \$2,400.

The purchase included four mummies, two (or perhaps more) rolls of papyrus, and at least two smaller papyrus documents.

In 1837, as the ends of the scrolls were breaking off, they were mounted on paper and put in glass frames. In some cases, they were cut to fit the frames. The remaining scroll sections were kept, moving from Kirtland to Far West, Missouri, then to Nauvoo, Illinois. Before Joseph Smith's death, he gave the mummies and papyri to his

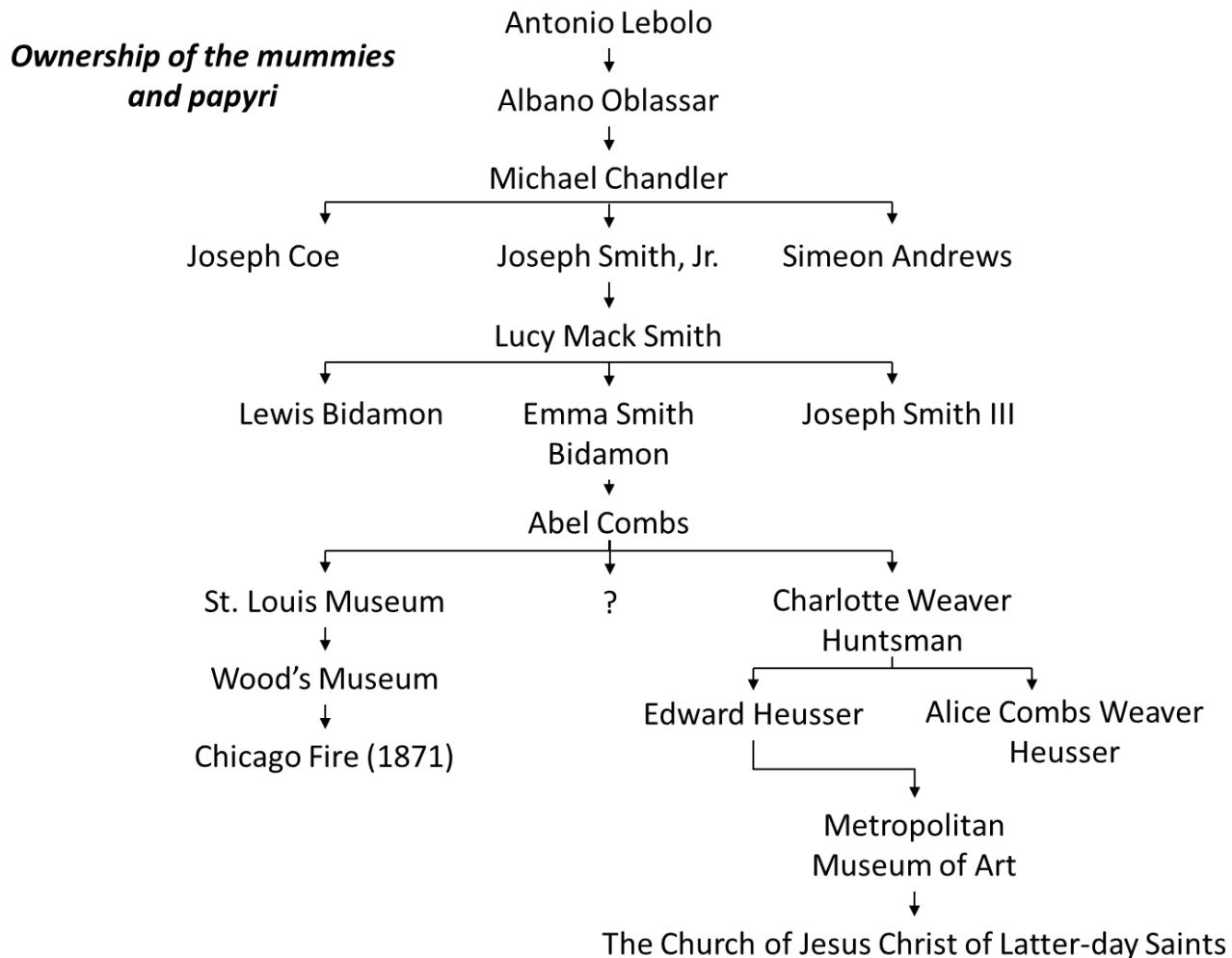


mother, who showed them to people for 25 cents to earn a little money. Upon Lucy Mack Smith's death, Emma Smith, Lewis Bidamon (Emma's second husband), and Joseph Smith III sold them to Abel Combs. Combs sold most of the collect to a museum in St. Louis, which later sold them to the Wood's Museum in Chicago. In 1871, a great fire destroyed the city of Chicago, and the mummies and papyri were apparently destroyed. The fragments that had been mounted and put under glass were either given or sold to Edward and Alice Heusser who kept them for many years. In 1918, Alice attempted to sell them to

the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, without success. In 1947, Edward tried again and was successful, as the current museum curator, Ludlow Bull, was very interested in Egyptian artifacts.

Recognizing their tie to Joseph Smith, in 1966, the museum approached a non-LDS scholar from the University of Utah, to see if he might discover the Church's interest in the scroll fragments. Aziz S. Atiya thus brokered the deal, and the Church received the fragments from the Met on 27 November 1967. Importantly, the Church published a full article, complete with photos of some of the papyri, in the *Improvement Era* just two months later, January 1968.

Here is a summary of the various owners and locations of the papyri.



It's important to note we only have fragments of at least two of the original scrolls that Joseph Smith possessed. Based on the type of scrolls, the material, the handwriting, and other clues, some have estimated that the two scrolls of Hor and Tsemminis that Joseph Smith possessed could have been 320 centimeters long (about 10.5 feet). We only have a fraction of each of those scrolls. The other papyrus fragments he had were likely just parts of scrolls, though originally of a similar length.

Here is a list of the papyri that Joseph Smith had, to the best of anyone's ability to determine. All scrolls are from the Greco-Roman (Ptolemaic) period of Egyptian history, approx. 300 – 150 BC. They can be reliably dated from the names of the owners of the scrolls who were known priests and rulers in Thebes.

#### Scroll of Hor

- Smallest and most complete, though badly damaged
- Book of Breathings Made by Isis text, the oldest of 29 in existence (dated to 200-150 BC)
- Contains Facs. 1 and 3



- A copy of the *Book of the Dead* in the Louvre is perhaps from same person (Hor)

### Scroll of Tsemminis

- Dated to 300-250 BC
- Book of the Dead text
- Several fragments remain

### Scroll of Noufianoub

- Book of the Dead text
- Two fragments remain

### Scroll of Amenophis

- Nothing remains but a copy of three columns of text in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, no. 6
- Book of the Dead text

### Hypocephalus of Sheshonq

- Greek: *Hypo* = under, *cephalus* = head
- Usually made of metal or linen
- Is Fac. 2

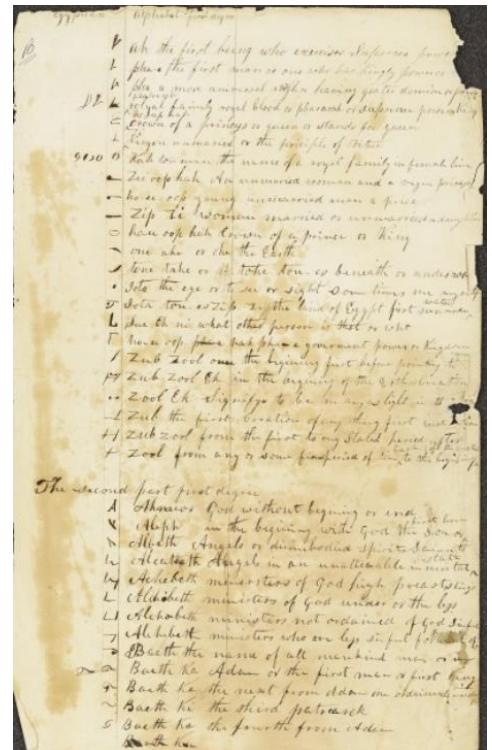
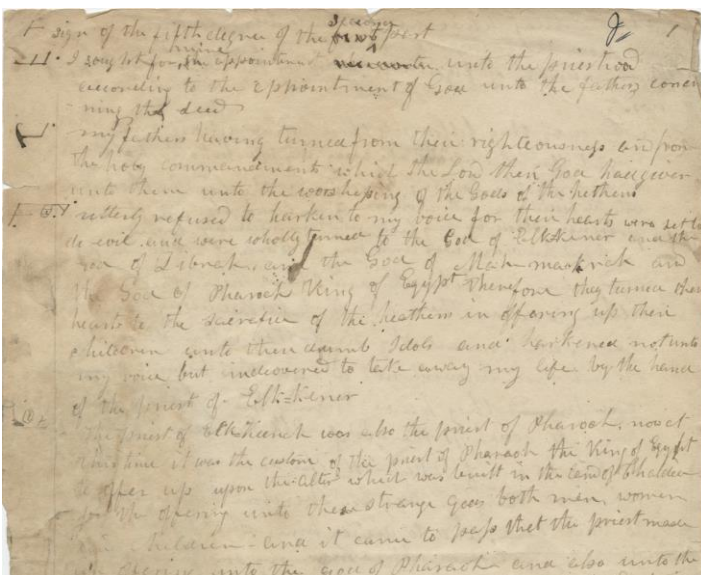
## The Coming Forth of the Book of Abraham

No useful first-hand accounts exist telling the story of the creation of the Book of Abraham, either from Joseph Smith or any of his scribes. One reference from Warren Parish records him saying, "I have set by his [Joseph Smith's] side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration from Heaven."<sup>1</sup> A couple second-hand sources suggested he used his seer stone, but they were either not witnesses to the work or their statements were given many years after the fact. There is no other indication that Joseph was using his seer stone at this time in his life, so if he did use it for the Abraham translation, it was a notable exception.

What can be pieced together from journals, letters, the Abraham documents, and

other sources show that translation work began very soon after the purchase of the mummies and scrolls in the summer of 1835. There were two

apparently independent efforts: one was the translation of the text by revelation, the other an intellectual effort by Joseph Smith and others to decipher the Egyptian language. There is no indication from the documents or any other source that the two efforts were coordinated or dependent in any way. In the



<sup>1</sup> JSP: RT4, xxiv. This was said after Parrish had left the Church (1838) and was antagonistic to Joseph Smith.

former task, Joseph received revelation which was recorded by his scribes. In the latter effort, characters from the papyri were copied into notebooks or onto other sheets of paper and they tried to determine their meaning. This follows a pattern of many others of the day who were examining Egyptian characters in an attempt to ascertain their meaning. While Joseph's handwriting is on some of these documents, he seems to have been only involved in a minor way, with his scribes—Warren Parrish, Oliver Cowdery, and Frederick G. Williams, all of whom had been promised experiences interpreting ancient languages in personal revelations or blessings—doing nearly all of this work. As with all other such efforts in that day, there is nothing in these documents that show they achieved any success in understanding the language.

The translation appears to have been done in two stages. The first part was in 1835, right after the papyri were purchased. The second part was in 1842, after the Saints were settled in Nauvoo and in conjunction with getting it published. The original dictation documents are not extant. There are three known 1835 copies, the longest one going from 1:1 to 2:18 (the others start at 1:4 and go to either 2:2 or 2:6). There are two manuscripts from 1842, one a copy of the longer 1835 document and the other covering 3:18-26 only, and the other a copy of the explanation text for Fac. 2, including the only known hand-drawn copy of the original image from the papyri.

The printing of the book in the *Times and Seasons* started on 1 Mar 1842 with Abraham 1:1 – 2:18 and Fac. 1. The second section was 2:19 – 5:21 and Fac. 2. The final printed section was Fac. 3 on 16 May 1842. There is evidence to conclude that Joseph Smith planned on providing more to be printed (comments about how long the translation was, etc.), but it never happened, and there are no manuscripts that go beyond Abraham 3:26 (meaning the printed version in the *Times and Seasons* is the only copy for the later chapters).

## Questions About the Book of Abraham

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There are four potential approaches to the Book of Abraham (from Gee, *Introduction*, 88):

1. It is fiction, made up and written by Joseph Smith.
2. It is inspired fiction, not true (as an ancient record) but written by Joseph Smith through revelation.
3. It is pseudepigrapha, a truly ancient book but not written by Abraham.
4. It is an ancient book written by Abraham.

The first position is held by critics and the latter by many Church members, not allowing for much middle ground. The second and third positions are held by few and tend to migrate over time to either 1 or 4. I believe there is every reason to believe that #4 is the correct position, in spite of the critics.

### The papyri are not the Book of Abraham

This is the basis of nearly all the charges and concerns relating to the Book of Abraham: the Joseph Smith papyrus fragments in the possession of the Church are not texts that relate to the Book of Abraham. And since at least 1968, the Church has known and publicly stated that that was true. The fragments are parts of scrolls called by scholars “Book of Breathings” and “Book of the Dead” that date from about the second century BC in the Thebes area of Egypt. Such text are traditionally labeled ‘funerary texts’ because they have been found with mummies and coffins but modern Egyptologists today recognize what Hugh Nibley declared in 1975 when he published *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, that they are also texts for the living and associated with worship and the temple. BYU Egyptologists have carefully studied, translated, commented on, and



published these texts. Everyone agrees what they are.

What the critics overlook (quite intentionally) is that *that fact doesn't really make any difference*. There are many reasons why Joseph Smith could have translated the Book of Abraham from scrolls in his possession and yet the fragments we have left don't reflect that text. The most important is that we are missing most of the papyri that Joseph purchased and had in his possession. And while the critics call foul on that count (even if we had them all, they say, they would still be Egyptian funerary texts, not Abraham), they are simply not being honest when don't recognize the strong (non-LDS) research that shows that scrolls of this type and time commonly had more than one text on them. It is not at all a stretch to say that the record of Abraham could have been on another part of one of the scrolls.

Additionally, to support that idea, Abraham was a prominent figure in Egypt during this time and stories were circulating about him among Jews and Egyptians alike. The Egyptian religion of the time of the scrolls was very eclectic, embracing elements of many religions, including the Jewish faith and history. And Jews were producing a large number of texts relating to Abraham at this time (more on that below). There is even one hand-drawn scene on an Egyptian papyrus from this time that is remarkably similar to Abraham's very unique lion couch scene (Fac. 1) and mentions Abraham in the text.

Of course, the critics want to argue that since Fac. 1 is one of the surviving fragments and since it is clearly part of the Book of Abraham, the text Joseph used must be the text right next to it. However, that is contrary to the witnesses. First-hand accounts, including Joseph Smith himself, attribute the source of the Book of Abraham to a long scroll, the contents of which were burned in the Chicago fire of 1871. These accounts speak of this long scroll being intact in Nauvoo, when we know the small fragments, mounted in frames that the Church has today, were removed from the scrolls no later than 1837. So what the eyewitnesses were saying was the source of the text of Abraham was not one of the fragments we can all view today, in spite of the fact that Fac. 1 is part of the Book of Abraham.

### Facsimile 1 has nothing to do with Abraham

Many have seen this as typical "lion-couch" scene (many have been found) but it is actually quite unique. Most such scenes are either mummification or resurrection scenes: this is neither. The person on the altar is dressed, not mummified, and very

much alive (as seen by the raised hands and legs). The priest is standing between the person and the altar, again suggesting movement (not as clear in the facsimile as in the original).



One key thought is that the meaning of this scene for ancient Egyptians might not be the right comparison. Since Abraham is a Jewish figure, we should be perhaps be looking at how ancient Jews interpreted this scene, plus the spiritual meaning Joseph Smith attributed to it in his translation. Two Jewish texts, heavily influenced by Egyptian religion, are the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the *Testament of Abraham*. In terms of the Egyptian take on it, though, perhaps the closest images we have to match Fac. 1 come from the temple of Denderah which are about being divinely protected and human sacrifice, as is to Fac. 1.

One criticism is that the Egyptians did not practice human sacrifice, but research and careful thinking call out two points to counter that. First, when Abraham is

sacrificed, it's in Syria, not Egypt, and though it's a "priest of Pharaoh" (Abraham 1:8), he is likely from that area, not Egypt, and human sacrifice is well documented there. However, it has been discovered in recent years that Egyptians did indeed engage in human sacrifice on certain occasions, one of which is when someone was challenging or disrupting the existing religious order, just what Abraham was doing.





Joseph Smith said that the crocodile at the bottom of the page is the “god of Pharaoh,” which interpretation was dismissed by scholars earlier. However, it is now known that during the very time of Abraham, there was an association between the crocodile and the king (pharaoh), which later disappeared.

A final note is the existence of a lion-couch scene that was discovered (Leiden Papyrus I 384 (PGM xii) that shows a person on the couch who is named in the text as “Abraham.”

## Egyptologists say that Joseph Smith’s translation of the facsimiles is all wrong.

Since we don’t have the papyrus from which the Book of Abraham was taken, there isn’t any way to critique Joseph Smith’s translation. But with the three facsimiles, we have the images and his translation, making comparison possible.



The first time Egyptologists looked at the translation was in 1912 when an anti-Mormon minister sent them copies of the facsimiles and asked them to critique it. None of them agreed with anything Joseph translated, dismissing it all out of hand. Other publications since then typically quote those early scholars. However, today’s understanding of Egyptian has progressed much in the last one hundred years, and the fascinating thing is that many of the interpretations the Prophet gave are today quite valid. New things are being learned all the time. People who left the Church a decade or two ago over something some Egyptologist said need to know that today, many of those things have been overturned—there is no reason to reject the Book of Abraham because of those things any more. As

one scholar put it, as more is learned about Egyptian, Joseph Smith looks better every year.

We already discussed Fac. 1 above but there is one thing to add: all three facsimiles have been found in various venues associated with Abraham, and here they all three are in the Book of Abraham. Off all the images on the papyri, for Joseph Smith to single out these three and for them to be ones tied to Abraham in other examples is quite stunning.

For example, the ancients associated drawings like Fac. 2 (called a hypocephalus) with Abraham, so fascinating that it would show up with his book. Additionally, some specific translations Joseph Smith made can be compared:

- Figure 1: **JS:** “Kolob, signifying the first creation, nearest to the celestial, or the residence of God. First in government, the last pertaining to the measurement of time.” **Egyptologists:** ‘absurd.’ **Today:** JS’s comment that it is ‘nearest to the celestial, or the residence of God’ agrees with the discovery that a Semitic root is QLB meaning ‘heart, middle, center.’
- Figure 1: **JS:** “. . . this earth, which is called by the Egyptians Jah-oh-eh.” **Egyptologists:** ‘Jah-oh-eh is nonsense, not an Egyptian word at all.’ **Today:** Egyptian word for earth is *3h.t*, which is pronounced ‘yoh-heh.’
- Figure 3: **JS:** “Is made to represent God, sitting upon his throne, clothed with power and authority; with a crown of eternal light upon his head; representing also the grand Key-words of the Holy Priesthood.” **Egyptologists:** ‘another nonsense translation.’ **Today:** The scepter signifies either kingship or godhood; the circular object is the sun—certainly a crown of eternal light; the two eyes are the *wedjat*-eyes representing divine wisdom or intelligence—easily the keywords of the priesthood.

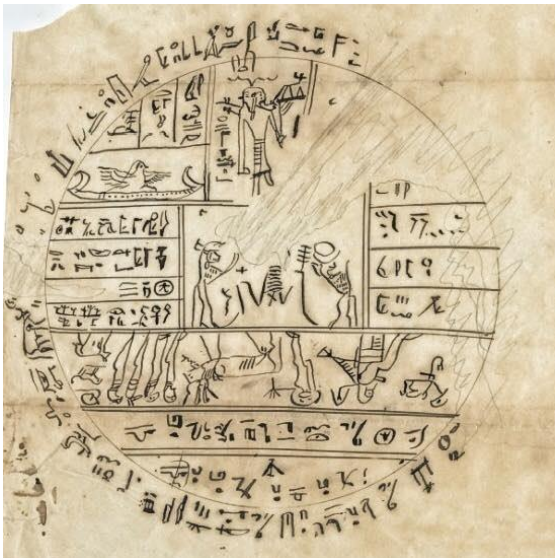


- Figure 4: **JS**: “Answers to the Hebrew word Raukeeyang, signifying expanse, or the firmament of the heavens; also a numerical figure, in Egyptian signifying one thousand.” **Egyptologists**: ‘Is an Egyptian god, not the heavens or a number.’ **Today**: It is the hawk-god, Horus-Sokar, who is associated with the revolution of the sun and other celestial bodies. The ‘ship’ he’s on is called by the Egyptians ‘the ship of a thousand.’
- Figure 6: **JS**: “Represents this earth in its four quarters.” **Egyptologists**: ‘four gods, not parts of the earth.’ **Today**: The four sons of Horus, gods of the four quarters of the earth and presiding over the four cardinal points.

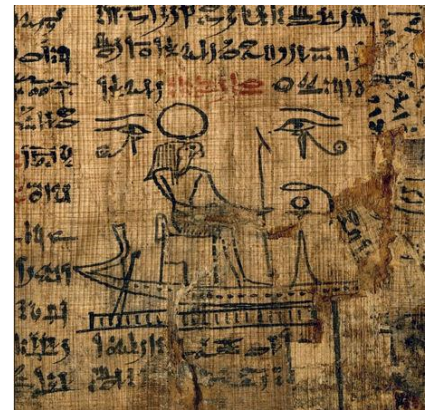
The text of Fac. 2 for Joseph Smith is fundamentally about the temple, creation, and the afterlife, which is exactly how Egyptologists see them: a map of the cosmos and how to get where you should go. “Kolob” (fig. 1) is a true Egyptian word (often written ‘keleb’ but like most ancient Semitic languages, vowels are uncertain) which is associated with the ‘center’ or ‘middle,’ fitting nicely with his translation.

With Fac. 3, the critics enjoy pointing out that in Joseph Smith’s interpretation, he doesn’t even get the gender right, much less the characters’ identities and their actions. This is a typical presentation of a deceased person before Osiris, with gods and servants looking on. However, additional research has discovered a number of these same scenes where the person on the throne is identified with Abraham. Other evidence has pointed to examples of such scenes where the genders are switched—female figures playing males and vice versa. So Joseph Smith’s interpretation is not only supported but in line with other similar scenes.

### Facsimile 2 was damaged and Joseph Smith just stuck other pieces in then ‘translated’ those



The oldest copy of Fac. 2 was done in Nauvoo, though the exact date and person who copied it are unknown (the document is in Willard Richard’s handwriting and was created between late 1841 and early 1842). It shows that at that time, Fac. 2 was somewhat damaged, especially on the top right. When Reuben Hedlock made the plates to print Fac. 2, the gaps were filled in by pulling images and text from other papyri in the collection. The only image of significance was the character in the upper right, which Joseph Smith translated as “God, sitting upon his throne” (Fac. 2, fig. 3). The critics point out that the image was pulled from JSP IV, which appears to be the case, but as with other criticisms, the response is, ‘So what?’ We don’t know how damaged the original was in 1835 when the Prophet first examined it; it could be that the missing section was intact or



at least more intact when it was acquired, which would mean that he knew what was there before. Additionally, examination of other hypocephali indicate that it was quite common for that very figure to be in that position. So the likely scenario is that Fac. 2 was more intact at the beginning, then a piece of it broke away and was lost. When it time to print it, Joseph Smith noticed a similar image on Papyrus IV so instructed the printer to replace the missing portion with that—all very reasonable and correct.

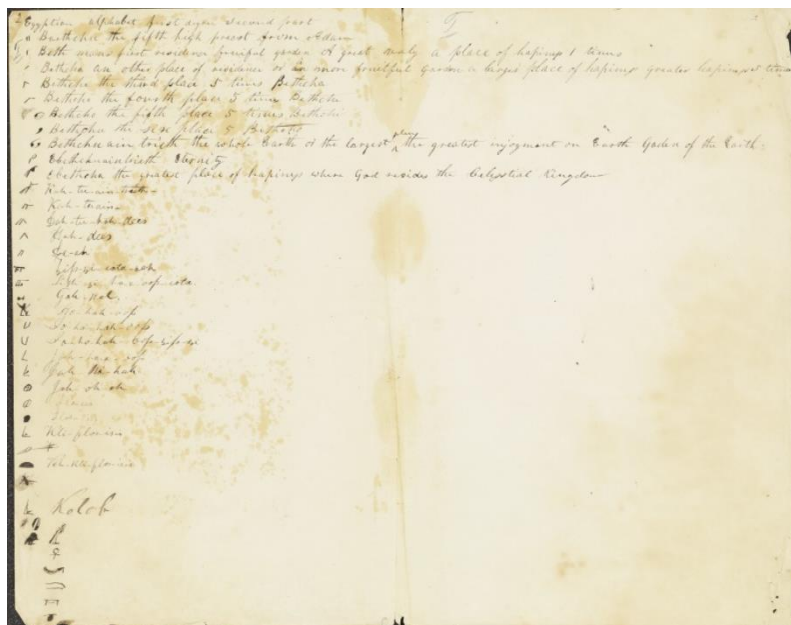
### The Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar documents show they didn’t know what they were doing

The story behind the documents where the brethren in Kirtland were doing various things with the characters on the papyri is not fully known. Critics point to these also as demonstrations that Joseph Smith didn’t understand anything about Egyptian because the ‘translations’ on the documents have nothing to do with the meanings of the characters. That fact is correct, but the conclusion is not.



It appears to be that Joseph Smith, Warren Parish, Oliver Cowdery, W. W. Phelps, and others were indeed trying to understand the Egyptian language, and were experimenting with what the characters might mean. The effort was short-lived—a few weeks at most—and they simply gave up at some point, leaving whole pages blank between entries in the books they had used for this purposed. We don't know exactly what they were trying to do nor how they did it. Most of the effort seems to have been independent of Joseph Smith, though his handwriting is certainly on some of the documents, so we know he was engaged in some way.

Others in that day were doing exactly the same thing. There are many people attempting to decipher Egyptian and except for a handful of scholars in Europe (whose work Joseph never saw), they all were getting it terribly wrong. Joseph Smith was very interested in ancient languages, likely due to his translation of the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and other efforts. In fact, what may have disrupted their attempt the understand Egyptian was the real opportunity to study Hebrew with a Jewish scholar, who they got to teach them in the winter of 1835-



1836. Whatever these papers were, they are clearly an intellectual effort, not a revelatory one. The revelatory experience was acknowledged by one of his scribes, Warren Parish, after he became antagonistic to Joseph and the Church but still said the Book of Abraham was translated by direct revelation, not careful study or any other effort of the intellect.

## The papyri are not from the time of Abraham but almost 2,000 years after him

The papyri have been reliably dated to about 200 BC. Abraham did indeed live nearly 2,000 prior to that. Some critics have taken the phrase on the heading “the writings of Abraham . . . written by his own hand” to mean that he authored the actual papyri we have himself, but it doesn't have to mean that at all. In fact, we would be shocked to have any kind of document that old. They are confusing the term “text” with “manuscript” or “document.” A text can be very old, but the manuscript or document we read it on can be quite recent. All of the Biblical text we have are manuscript copies, some dating hundreds or even thousands of years from when the original texts were written. The Book of Mormon that we read is a document copy of a translation of an ancient text. So we shouldn't be surprised if the Book of Abraham is a document from just before the time of Christ, written physically by a scribe of that period, but copying a more ancient text that could be traced back to Abraham himself.

## There are anachronistic words like “Egyptus,” “Pharaoh,” and “Chaldeans” in the text that couldn't have been written by Abraham himself

See the above comment about “text” versus “manuscript.” The Bible itself is full of such anachronisms, including the term “Chaldeans” being used in the wrong historical context of the original, but the right one for the (unknown) editor. Scribes would update or change the text to match the understanding of our day. Jewish culture and Egyptian culture were heavily influencing each other during this time and some things in the Book of Abraham reflect common Jewish terms and understanding of the time of the papyri (200 BC) more than the time of Abraham—or of Joseph Smith.

Kolob, Jershon, and Olishem are three examples of terms found in the Book of Abraham that are correct for the time and place. Kolob is already mentioned above. Olishem is perhaps the most fascinating because the name is not found in the Bible and was unknown in Joseph Smith's day. One earlier scholar called it “gibberish.” But on a tablet from the Akkadian ruler Naram Sin (from Abraham's time and place) and another text dated shortly after that, the same place name (Ulishem) is found.

# The Message of the Book of Abraham

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The most important thing the critics overlook is the book itself. Wrapped up their self-created controversies about the history of the text, they fail to acknowledge the unique contributions of this short little book and how amazingly it is supported by ancient texts. The Book of Abraham fits marvelously into the ancient world, in ways that were completely unknown to Joseph Smith or anyone in his day.

It is worth quoting at some length just one section of John Gee's *Introduction* book on this topic, which only covers a few of the verses of the Book of Abraham (he continues on like this for nearly fifty pages:

The Book of Abraham begins much like other autobiographies from Abraham's time and place. It begins with a statement indicating that the author wrote it, who he wrote it for, where he lived, that he was a member of his father's household, and what prompted him to leave his residence for another place. Additional details similar to those found in other autobiographies of Abraham's time and place include the emphasis on divine inspiration prompting the departures for a new residence, the promises made to ancestors known from the records available to the ancient authors, the practice of worshipping the way their ancestors did, and the practice of making covenants. One different is that autobiographies of Abraham's contemporaries discuss worshipping the way their parents did, but Abraham specifies that his father did not worship correctly. As a result, he explains that he worshipped the way that his more distant ancestors did.

Biblical scholars have not agreed on the time and place that Abraham lived, but the Book of Abraham provides additional information that specifies both. In the Bible, Abraham must flee his homeland (*môladâ*) in Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 12:1). Later he sends his servant back to his homeland (*môladâ*) to find a wife for his son (Genesis 24:4, 7). The servant is sent to Aram-Naharaim in modern-day northern Syria or southern Turkey (Genesis 24:10) and not Mesopotamia as the King James translators rendered it. This location of Aram-Naharaim must have been the location of Abraham's homeland. The Book of Abraham also indicates that Abraham's homeland was in that area. Olishem (Abraham 1:10), one of the places mentioned near Ur, appears in Mesopotamia and Egyptian inscriptions in association with Ebla, which is in northern Syria.

Abraham's homeland was incorporated as part of the Egyptian empire under the Twelfth Dynasty pharaohs Sesostri III and his son, Amenemhet III, but it was then lost to the subsequent pharaohs. This provides an historical date for the events of the first chapter of the Book of Abraham.

At that time Egypt practiced human sacrifice, as historical and archaeological evidence both attest. It was a ritual (Abraham 1:7-11, 15) directed against religious offenders (Abraham 1:5-6) that could take place either in Egypt or in areas Egypt influenced (Abraham 1:1, 10, 20). Three of the four deities mentioned, Elkenah, Libnah, and Korash, are attested for the approximate time and place of Abraham.

Because Abraham's life was in danger, he left his homeland, which was controlled by Egypt, and crossed the Euphrates to Haran, which was outside of Egyptian control (Abraham 1:1; 2:3-4). After the reign of Amenemhet III, he left Haran and went to Canaan, which was then no longer under Egypt's control (Abraham 2:6-18).

When famine set in, the closest steady supply of grain was the land of Egypt, the northern part of which was now under the management of the Fourteenth Dynasty. These pharaohs were "partaker[s] of the blood of the Canaanites by birth" (Abraham 1:21) and bore Canaanite names. Abraham seems to classify all pharaohs as Canaanite, though the Twelfth Dynasty pharaohs whose servants tried to kill him were not. Since Abraham never met the Twelfth Dynasty pharaohs, he may have assumed that all pharaohs were like the Fourteenth Dynasty ones he met.

Although the dynasties in northern Egypt might have changed, pharaonic power and prerogatives had not changed. Abraham was instructed by God to refer to his wife, Sarah, as his sister (Abraham 2:22-25). This takes advantage of an ambiguity in the Egyptian language: the Egyptian word for wife (*hime*) means only *wife*, but the Egyptian word for sister (*sone*) means both *sister* and *wife*. Thus, the term that Abraham used was not false, but ambiguous. It was also necessary: since numerous Egyptian texts discuss how pharaohs could take any woman that they fancied and would put the husband to death if the woman was married, this advice saved Abraham's life (Gee, *Introduction*, 97-102).

This is just a sample of how the Book of Abraham fits into the ancient world. In only five chapters, it is packed with unique and important details about Abraham's life that are not in the Bible and were unknown to anyone in Joseph Smith's day, but have since been supported in other ancient documents and traditions discovered since Joseph Smith's time. Below are just a few from the appendix of Tvedtnes et al, *Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham*. The reference in parentheses is to verses in the Book of Abraham; the number after the dash is the number of ancient texts providing support for that topic from their list.

- Abraham's fathers worshipped idols (1:5-6) – 37
- Terah, Abraham's father, worshipped idols (1:16-17, 27) – 36
- Children were sacrificed (1:7-8, 10-11) – 26
- Those who would not worship idols were killed (1:11) – 15
- Abraham was brought to be killed/sacrificed because he would not worship idols (1:7, 12, 15; Fac. 1, fig. 3) – 60
- Abraham was fastened or bound (1:15; Fac. 1, fig. 2) – 15
- When in danger, Abraham prayed (1:15) – 11
- An angel came to rescue Abraham (1:15; 2:13; Fac. 1, fig. 1) – 21
- God rescued Abraham from death (1:15; 3:20) – 34
- The priest (or leader) was smitten and died (1:20, 29) – 21
- Abraham held the priesthood (1:2; 2:9, 11; Fac. 2, fig. 3; Fac. 3, fig. 1) – 7
- Abraham made converts in Haran (2:15) – 21
- Abraham was knowledgeable about astronomy which he learned from records and God (1:31; 3:1-18; Fac. 2 and 3) – 48
- Abraham taught astronomy to the Egyptians (Fac. 3) – 8
- Abraham knew about the creation story (1:31; ch. 4-5) – 9
- Abraham saw the premortal spirits (3:21-24) – 13
- The Lord instructed Abraham to say that Sarah was his sister (2:22-25) – 5
- Abraham left a record of his own (1:31) – 6
- Pharaoh was a descendent of Ham but also Canaan (1:21-22, 24-25, 27) – 7
- Abraham sat on the king's throne (Fac. 3, fig. 1) – 6
- Abraham was sixty-two when he left Haran (Genesis says seventy-five) (2:14) – 7

## Conclusion

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The most important message about the Book of Abraham is similar to other issues we've discussed with the Book of Mormon and Church history topics: keep searching, keeping learning, and keep the faith. Too many have given up and thrown in the towel because they were caught up in the misunderstandings, exaggerations, or outright lies of the critics about the Book of Abraham. What history demonstrates again and again is the time vindicates Joseph Smith. Not only do his translations and revelations get better every year, but honest seekers recognize more and more that his work stands the test of criticism and examination. The Book of Abraham is a profound, complex, and amazing book of ancient scripture that can be read and studied to great benefit from many angles. It is worth the investment in every way, because it teaches eternal truths.

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