Insufficient Evidence Is the Best Kind

Filed together in a gray cardboard box in the Church Historian’s Office is a strange batch of early Church papers, all in the handwriting of men associated with Joseph Smith in Kirtland 1835–37 and in Nauvoo 1841–42, and all classified for one reason or another as “Egyptian” (fig. 60). We shall therefore call them the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers.” Along with a number of odds and ends are two impressive documents: one a bound manuscript commonly and falsely designated as “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar,” and the

This paper appeared originally in BYU Studies 11/4 (1971): 350–99. [Brian M. Hauglid was the principal editor of this article.]

1. [The classification “Kirtland Egyptian Papers” is somewhat a misnomer. The papers that focus strictly on Egyptian grammar, alphabet, and numbers were all produced in the Kirtland period and can rightly be identified as the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers.” However, the papers that focus on the Book of Abraham text were produced in both the Kirtland and Nauvoo periods and are quite different from the Egyptian papers. Therefore, it would be more correct to designate these papers as the “Book of Abraham Papers” or “Book of Abraham Manuscripts”—eds.]

2. [This bound volume is “falsely designated” in two ways: (1) it is not conclusively tied to Joseph Smith, and (2) its actual title is “Grammar & Alphabet [sic] of the Egyptian Language”—eds.]
other purported to be the first chapter and a half of the Book of Abraham as translated from a number of accompanying hieratic symbols. A photographic record of some of these documents was made on a single filmstrip by the Church Historian’s Office some years ago, but nothing was put on the strip to indicate the nature, number, or relationship of the various items included. So when the film was purloined, reproduced without permission, and copies sold in Salt Lake City in 1966, the publishers had no means of knowing what they were dealing with, but joyfully accepted the signature of Joseph Smith on one piece of paper as proof that the whole batch was his own handiwork.

The public was only too glad to go along with the ruse, which went unchallenged by the Mormons, who had unconsciously laid the foundation of a massive misunderstanding many years before. In February of 1935, when a bound manuscript captioned “Grammar & Alphabet [sic] of the Egyptian Language” turned up in the Church Historian’s Office, the finders were understandably eager to claim the discovery of a major writing of Joseph Smith himself; they not only accepted the thing as his work without question or examination, but even went so far as to label it “Joseph Smith’s Translation of Abraham’s Alphabet and Grammar.”

3. [Nibley points to three manuscripts from fall 1835 that contain roughly Abraham 1:1–2:18. Another manuscript (1841–42) also covers Abraham 1:1–2:18 but does not contain any hieratic characters (cf. chart for details)—eds.]

4. [Cf. chart for details of scribes. The microfilm Nibley refers to here was produced in the 1950s for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and included all the Egyptian papers and only Abraham Mss. #2 and #3 (and also some unrelated Arabic documents). An unidentified individual made the microfilm accessible to Jerald Tanner, who published it in 1966 under the title “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar”—eds.]

5. James R. Clark, The Story of the Pearl of Great Price (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 156. Clark’s suggestion (pp. 109–10) that this may be a translation of a grammar written by Abraham meets with many objections, not the least of which is that the Prophet records in the “Joseph Smith ‘Diary’” kept by Willard Richards, 1842–44, under the date of “Wednesday Nov 15 1843. . . . P. M. at the office. Suggested the idea of preparing a grammar of
**Egyptian Manuscripts (Ms. 1295)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Folder Number</th>
<th>Date [Editor’s]</th>
<th>Physical Description</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [1836/37]</td>
<td>1 vol., 34 pages + 186 blank</td>
<td>31 x 20 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [1836/37]</td>
<td>1 sheet, 2 pages</td>
<td>33 x 20 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [Oct. 1835]</td>
<td>2 sheets, 4 pages</td>
<td>32 x 20 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Manuscript entitled “Egyptian alphabet,” in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [Oct. 1835]</td>
<td>5 sheets, 9 pages</td>
<td>33 x 20 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Manuscript entitled “Egyptian alphabet,” in the handwriting of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [Oct. 1835]</td>
<td>4 sheets, 4 pages</td>
<td>various sizes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Manuscript in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. Top has deteriorated, similarity to Mss. 3 and 4 indicates it was probably titled “Egyptian alphabet.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [Oct. 1835]</td>
<td>1 vol., 3 pages, 9 pages blank</td>
<td>20 x 15 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Front cover titled “Valuable discovery of hiden [sic] records.” Signature in the handwriting of Joseph Smith. English contents are in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. Signature on the cover F. G. Williams.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [1836/37]</td>
<td>1 vol., 3 pages, 8–9 blank</td>
<td>20 x 16 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English contents in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps. Back cover has “F.G.W.” and “Williams” inscribed on it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [1836/37]</td>
<td>1 sheet (1 fold)</td>
<td>32 x 40 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Egyptian characters and hieroglyphs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [1836/37]</td>
<td>1 sheet</td>
<td>39 x 19 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Characters by unknown person.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>1 sheet</td>
<td>33 x 20 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Egyptian Papyrus attached to a sheet of paper. Present location unknown. [Only nine folders remain at present—eds.]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Book of Abraham Manuscripts (Ms. 1294)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Folder Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Physical Description</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [1835]</td>
<td>5 sheets, 10 pages</td>
<td>32 x 20 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [1835]</td>
<td>2 sheets, 4 pages</td>
<td>33 x 19 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Book of Abraham, 1:4 to 2:6, in the handwriting of Phelps [F. G. Williams—eds.].</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>ca. 1837 [1835]</td>
<td>3 sheets, 6 pages</td>
<td>32 x 19 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Book of Abraham, 1:4 to 2:2, in the handwriting of Warren Parrish.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 Fac. 2</td>
<td>ca. 1841 [1841/42]</td>
<td>3 pages</td>
<td>various sizes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Includes explanations in the handwriting of Willard Richards.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fac. 2</td>
<td>ca. 1843 [1842]</td>
<td>broadside</td>
<td>32 x 19 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engraved by Reuben Hedlock [or Willard Richards—eds.].</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fac. ??6?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With explanation of the characters. Present location unknown.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 60. Manuscripts in the Church Historian’s Office, Salt Lake City, Utah.

wonder that the parties who since 1966 have diligently exploited this document as a weapon against the Prophet the Egyptian language.” Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 427. [A few of the sources in this article have been updated—eds.]

6. [Nibley here notes a facsimile manuscript “from the Book of Abraham with explanation of the characters. (On the back is a letter, Aug. 1, 1843, to Clyde Williams & Co., Harrisburg, Pa., signed by Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps.)” At present it is unclear which manuscript Nibley is referring to and where it is now located. The updating here is based on what is currently in the archives of the Church Historian’s Office. However, while some of the above data is unknown, Nibley’s chart is still essentially correct—eds.]
have been only too happy to accept, on the authority of the Mormons themselves, the quite untested and untenable propositions that Joseph Smith actually wrote the thing and that he also translated that other text (the first chapter and part of the second chapter of the Book of Abraham) from the Egyptian symbols that accompany it.

The crucial documents upon which these false assumptions are based are

- the one which has been misleadingly dubbed “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar” (Egyptian Ms. #1, hereafter referred to as A&G),
- three manuscripts of Abraham containing roughly Abraham 1:1–2:18 (designated as Book of Abraham Mss. [#1], [#2, and #3 by the Church Historian’s Office]),
- a piece of paper (Egyptian Ms. #6) bearing the signature of Joseph Smith, thus incriminating him as the author of everything.

When in 1967 the original Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri became available and it was found that they contained some of the same characters as those accompanying the English texts of the above-mentioned Book of Abraham Mss. #1, #2, and #3, the “Fall of the Book of Abraham” was proclaimed with the usual orgiastic ecstasies of the Salt Lake City Messenger. Mr. Richard P. Howard of the Reorganized LDS Church

---

7. Obtainable under the title of Joseph Smith’s Alphabet and Grammar, from the Modern Microfilm Company in Salt Lake City, published in 1966. [Nibley objects to the use of Joseph Smith’s name in the title—eds.]

8. [See chart for details on how much Book of Abraham text each of the three manuscripts specifically covers. The omission of Book of Abraham Ms. #1 suggests Nibley focused on the microfilm, which contained only Mss. #2 and #3, to answer the critics. Wilford Wood purchased Ms. #1 from Charles Bidamon in 1935 and donated it to the Church in 1937. See “Joseph Smith Manuscript Given Church,” Salt Lake Tribune, 22 July 1937. Ms. #1 covers Abraham 1:1–2:18, has Egyptian characters, and is dated to the same general time period as Mss. #2 and #3 (1835). Since the critics are now very aware of this manuscript, it will be included throughout this paper with its counterpart manuscripts—eds.]
[now called Community of Christ] then took up the theme—receiving national attention through an article by Mr. Wallace Turner published in the New York Times—and claimed that the discovery and publication of fragments of the original papyri from which Joseph Smith produced the Book of Abraham “has given us the key to an authentic appraisal of the process by which the Book of Abraham text was formulated by Joseph Smith.” 9 Howard assumed without question or examination that Joseph Smith “produced the Book of Abraham” from these very papyri, and he argues that any such derivation would be impossible. But what do we know of the “process by which the Book of Abraham was formulated”? For that, according to Howard, we must go to “Joseph Smith’s Original Alphabet and Grammar,” where even “a quick glance . . . discloses the modus operandi of Joseph Smith in determining its contents.” He assures us that “all of the text from Abraham 1:4–2:18 has been verified as having originated in this way.” 10 In what way? What is the “process,” the modus operandi which Mr. Howard finds so obvious? If he knows so well how it was done, let him give us an independent translation of some of these texts using the same method. Anyone undertaking such an exercise will quickly begin to ask himself, “Is this really the very text, is this the very Alphabet and Grammar, is this the very process?” And if he honestly wants an answer he will soon discover the fatal defect in these documents—namely, that they are both random and fragmentary. There is a lot more to the story than they alone can tell us. Mr. Howard’s unawareness shows when he clinches his argument with an entry in the Joseph Smith History: “The remainder of this month I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet.

---

to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar.” 11 For Howard this is “an indication of how and when he proceeded to do it.” 12 But no matter how carefully one reads the passage, it tells us neither when, how, nor by whom the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were produced. The period referred to was only ten days in July 1835, while our papers were turned out years later; 13 the Egyptian materials found in the A&G are, as we shall see, not those used in the purported translations labeled Book of Abraham Mss. #1, #2, and #3; and where does Joseph Smith come into the picture? By persistent repetition of his name in every other line and in every context, and by strict avoidance of the names of the men who actually wrote the documents, it is an easy matter to stick Joseph Smith with the whole thing.

The trouble is that the stolen film 14 was both an incomplete and an indiscriminating document, though repeated reference to it as “the original film” seeks to cover up these fatal defects. There is nothing in the film to show what the various documents included in it have to do with each other; where each begins and ends; how many there are; what the purpose of each is. Above all, these few items do not represent the whole collection of Kirtland Egyptian documents: Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3, for example (which are included in the film), are far less important than Book of Abraham Mss. #1 and #4 (which are not), which alone can tell us what #2 and #3 are about. 15 It is the missing documents that make all the difference, and had the critics been

11. History of the Church, 2:238.
13. [This point is now considerably more complex. Note the new dating suggested in Nibley’s accompanying chart, pp. 504–5—eds.]
14. [Cf. note 4 above—eds.]
15. [What Mss. #1 and #4 tell us is that Mss. #2 and #3 (ca. 1835) are the earliest of the four manuscripts and are more significant than was earlier thought. It is also clear that Ms. #1 (ca. 1835) is a copy of Ms. #3 and that Ms. #4 is the latest of the four Book of Abraham manuscripts]
honest, they would have asked themselves from the first whether the odd and contradictory stuff that fell into their hands really told the whole story.

An Extended Production Schedule

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers are written in the handwriting of six men: W. W. Phelps, Frederick G. Williams, Warren Parrish, Oliver Cowdery, Willard Richards, and Joseph Smith.

The document in Willard Richards’s handwriting (Book of Abraham Ms. #4) is dated 1841—the date is written on the back of it in the hand of Thomas Bullock—and contains no Egyptian characters. F. G. Williams’s contribution is little more than a signature on the cover of Egyptian Ms. #6. This leaves Phelps, [F. G. Williams], Parrish, and Cowdery as the key operators. Cowdery and Phelps could have done their work between July 1835 (when the papyri reached Kirtland) and early 1838 (when both men broke with the Prophet). It is Parrish, who worked closely with Phelps, who limits the time span: he became a scribe to the Prophet on 29 October 1835 and was dismissed in December 1837 when Joseph Smith discovered that he had been working against him. Soon afterwards Parrish was excommunicated and never returned to the Church. This means that the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were produced no earlier than fall 1835 and no later than 1837. For all these matters the reader is referred to Dean Jessee’s article in *BYU Studies.*

(1841/42) and is likely the printer’s copy for the first installment of the Book of Abraham in the *Times and Seasons*—eds.

16. [Book of Abraham Ms. #2 was initially thought to be in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps. It has since been determined that Ms. #2 is in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams—eds.]

17. [Bracketed insertions in the text are editor’s changes—eds.]

18. [Although Egyptian Mss. #3–#5 (Egyptian Alphabet) may have been created as early as July 1835—eds.]

Joseph Smith first heard of the papyri on about 1 July 1835. After 19 July 1835, the Prophet, according to his journal, spent “the remainder of this month . . . continually engaged in . . . arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients.” 20 On 1 October 1835, he stayed at home and “labored on the Egyptian alphabet, in company with Brothers Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps, and during the research, the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients unfolded to our understanding.” 21 Then on Tuesday, 17 November 1835, he “exhibited the alphabet of the ancient records, to Mr. Holmes, and some others. Went with him to Frederick G. Williams’, to see the mummies.” 22 There is no mention of his working on a grammar or alphabet on the last day named; indeed, in the whole daily record of his activities only twelve days are mentioned on which he worked in those fields, and the work could hardly have been more than a preliminary speculation and blocking out of approaches. After the initial excitement, other concerns had priority, and a bare six weeks after the work had begun Phelps wrote to his wife: “Nothing has been doing in the translation of the Egyptian record for a long time, and probably will not for some time to come.” 23 In December 1835 Oliver Cowdery wrote a long and enthusiastic article on the Egyptian papyri for the Messenger and Advocate, promising more to come. Yet the subject is never mentioned again in Church publications until 1842, even though articles continued to appear by the same

20. History of the Church, 2:238.
21. Ibid., 2:286 (also recorded in a number of other sources).
22. Ibid., 2:316.
brethren—Phelps, Cowdery, and Parrish—on such subjects as “Ancient History—Egypt” (in two parts) and “An Account of Abraham.”

Moreover, we nowhere find mention of Joseph Smith engaged in translating the Book of Abraham itself before October 1840, when he reports that though the papyri had been “unrolled and preserved with great labor and care, my time has been hitherto too much taken up to translate the whole of them.” 24 After five years the work had hardly got beyond the physical manipulation of the documents. By the end of 1837 the chapter and a half that appear in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers had been translated, but in November of that year the Prophet still sought “means to translate and print the records taken from the Catacombs of Egypt.” 25 Most of the work, that is, was still to be done long after the men who wrote the Kirtland Egyptian Papers had left the Church, and none of it was published until 1842, five years later. Wilford Woodruff was thrilled when in February 1842 “Joseph the Seer . . . presented . . . some of the Book of Abraham” to a group of the Saints. It was exciting news: “Joseph has had these records in his possession for several years but has never presented them before the world in the English language until now.” 26 Ten days later the Prophet corrected Reuben Hedlock’s engraving for the issue of the Times and Seasons appearing on 15 March 1842, 27 and on the following day read proof of “the commencement of the Book of Abraham.” 28 Two days later he was again studying the original papyri with Hedlock “so that he might take the size of the

24. Quincy Whig 3/1 (17 October 1840), cited by Clark, Story of the Pearl of Great Price, 112. [Although the three 1835 Abraham manuscripts attest that Joseph must have done some translation before 1840—eds.]
27. History of the Church, 4:519.
28. Ibid., 4:542.
several plates or cuts.” Then after three days he “recommenced translating from the Records of Abraham,” and on the afternoon of the following day “continued the translation of the Book of Abraham,” and after some Church business “continued translating and revising, and reading letters in the evening.” Thus we see that even the rare occasions on which he found time to translate were interrupted by business of various sorts. James R. Clark posits that “the five chapters or 13 pages of the Book of Abraham” were all turned out in the thirty days between 19 February and 19 March 1842; compared with the size of the Book of Mormon and its rate of production, this is quite a minor performance. Clark suggests that “Joseph Smith had not until February of 1842 seriously undertaken the translation of the texts of the papyrus rolls, but had concentrated on Abraham’s Alphabet and Grammar from 1835 to 1842.” But to say that he worked only on the grammar is not to say that he worked long and hard on it; we know from his journal histories that he hardly got started on the project and could devote very little time to it. A note written by Willard Richards at the dictation of the Prophet, for an entry on Wednesday, 15 November 1843, states: “P.M. at the office. Suggested the idea of preparing a grammar of the Egyptian language.”

29. Ibid., 4:543.
30. Ibid., 4:548.
32. Ibid., 173. [Since Book of Abraham Mss. #1–#3 date to fall 1835, it is reasonable to suggest that the Prophet had at least translated up to Abraham 2:18 by October–November 1835. In addition, the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants was sustained in August. In this edition code names were used to protect the identities of Joseph Smith and others. One of the code names “Shinehah” implies that the Prophet may have at least translated up to Abraham 3:13 by August 1835. In A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 4–5, John Gee postulates that in July 1835 Joseph Smith likely had translated all of what was published and much more—eds.]
33. History of the Church, 6:79.
is quite clear that any Egyptian grammar by Joseph Smith never got beyond the planning stage. The translation was never completed either, and in February 1843 the editors of the *Times and Seasons* could announce, “we had the promise of Br. Joseph, to furnish us with further extracts from the Book of Abraham.”

Certainly translation had never had to wait on the completion or even the beginning of a grammar. In all, Brother Joseph spent barely ten days “arranging” a grammar, which along with his many other duties would allow him only time to line up a few ideas. Most significant, the only grammar in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers is merely a page-and-a-half long, is a work of no practical value whatever, and was never employed in any translation.

**Scripture or Stepchild?**

Mr. Howard has informed the nation that “it may be helpful to suggest that the Book of Abraham represents simply the product of Joseph Smith Jr.’s imagination wrought out in the midst of what to him must have been a very crucial and demanding and complex set of circumstances.” He generously concedes the Prophet the privilege of making a fool of himself in view of the severe pressure under which he was operating, the Book of Abraham being a sort of crash program undertaken in time of crisis. But this will never do. We have seen that the Prophet Joseph only worked on the Egyptian things when his time was not “too much taken up” with other things—that is, when he was not working in a crisis; such happy times did not come often, but they were spread over a period of eight years, so that whether he worked intensively on the project or not, he had plenty of time to consider what he was doing. It was not a rushed and crowded project but one reserved for scattered periods of relative leisure; Joseph Smith never did anything more calmly and deliberately. Even

34. *Times and Seasons* 4/6 (1 February 1843): 95.
35. Howard, “‘Book of Abraham,’” 45.
if the whole thing was done at Nauvoo in the spring of 1842, the plan was conceived at the very beginning, in 1835, giving the Prophet years to think it over.

Again, Mr. Howard looks no farther than his own rhetoric for proof when he solemnly informs us that the Book of Abraham was not “any kind of ‘inspired’ translation, as the church has traditionally considered the Book of Mormon to have been,” and applauds his church for “trying to divorce Joseph Smith from the ideas expressed in the Book of Abraham.”36 That argument concedes the Prophet’s ability to deal with reformed Egyptian but places ordinary Egyptian hopelessly beyond his reach.

Yet from the very beginning the Book of Abraham was viewed and discussed by the Latter-day Saints as authentic scripture. As soon as the Prophet got possession of the papyri, Phelps wrote to his wife that “the ‘rolls of papyrus’ contained the sacred record kept of Joseph in Pharaoh’s Court in Egypt, and the teachings of Father Abraham. God has so ordered it that these mummies and writings have been brought in the Church, and the sacred writing I had just locked up in Brother Joseph’s house when your letter came.” Moreover, these sacred records “will make a good witness for the Book of Mormon.”37 In the envelope with this letter, the Prophet Joseph enclosed his own kind and comforting note to Sister Phelps back at the farm in Missouri, promising her that her husband would in time be able to teach her “hiden things of old times,” even “treasures hid in the sand” (citing Deuteronomy 33:19).38 On 17 November 1835, the Prophet reported that an inspection of the same

---

36. Ibid., 44–45.
38. A photograph of this letter in the Prophet’s hand accompanies Phelps’s article, “Letters of Faith from Kirtland.”
documents left his visitor, Mr. Holmes, “strong in the faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” 39 In his long article in the Messenger and Advocate a month later, Oliver Cowdery hailed the documents as “an inestimable acquisition to our present scriptures.” 40 The Prophet told another visitor, Josiah Quincy, according to the latter, that “these ancient records . . . throw great light on the subject of Christianity,” and though he never got around to demonstrating the point in detail, it is nonetheless true. 41 Years later Orson Pratt recalled that “the Lord told him [Joseph Smith] they were sacred records, containing inspired writings of Abraham.” 42 Indeed, how could writings of Abraham be considered anything but sacred? This “Book of Abraham,” as it was always called, “that is to be presented to the inhabitants of the EARTH in the LAST DAYS,” as Wilford Woodruff wrote just after a session with the Prophet Joseph, 43 can no more be dismissed as a secular aberration than its sponsoring as scripture can be denied to Joseph Smith, its principal enthusiast.

The Alphabet and Grammar

We have seen that Joseph Smith as early as 1835 and as late as 1843 “suggested the idea of preparing a grammar of the Egyptian language” and made some preliminary exploratory motions. They could not have been more than that—there was too much else going on and, as the journal history shows, chances for serious work were few and far between. We also know that he worked “in company with Brothers Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps” and sought their advice and help. Also we know from the letters and journals of all those

40. Messenger and Advocate 2/3 (December 1835): 236 (emphasis added).
43. Wilford Woodruff Diary (Ms.), 19 February 1842, cited in Clark, Story of the Pearl of Great Price, 169.
men that they were strong-minded, independent, and (all but one) ambitious to shine as revelators and translators in their own right. So when a document like the so-called “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar” comes into our hands, before leaping to conclusions and inventing a title that is calculated and bound to cripple serious research, the first question to ask is, just who produced this? And right away we begin to notice a number of interesting things.

1. None of this is written by the hand of Joseph Smith, but it is all in the handwriting of William Wines Phelps, with the exception of five short appendages to certain sections written by the hand of Warren Parrish.

2. The A&G has no title page. It lies before us complete and undamaged in the original binding, but instead of a title page the writer did not even leave room for a title, so that the words “Grammar & Alphabet [sic] of the Egyptian Language” have to be awkwardly and unevenly crammed in at the top of the first page, as an afterthought when the page was completed (fig. 61). What makes this interesting is that Joseph Smith was a stickler for titles, as his publications will show. Indeed, the one proper title page among

44. Apart from examples in the standard works, the indefatigable Dean Jessee, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), calls our attention to documents dictated or written by the Prophet, for example, JS 1832–34 Diary: “Joseph Smith Jr- Record Book Baught for to note all the minute circumstances that comes under my observation (pp. 15, 39); JS 1835–36 Diary: “Sketch Book for the use

Figure 61. Egyptian Ms. #1. The entire grammar section of the “Grammar and Alphabet,” in the hand of W. W. Phelps, consists of this page and half of the following. [Niblèy refers here to Egyptian Ms. #1, pp. 2–3 in the A&G. Grammar points are also discussed on the following pages of the A&G: 15, 16 (top), 17, 20, 21—eds.] The reader can decide for himself whether any of this material was used in the composition of the Book of Abraham, and if so how. All images in this chapter are courtesy of the Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
Grammar of Alphabet of the Egyptian Language

This is called La-bron in Aramaic, and Arion in Greek. This character is in the first degree, indefinite and arbitrary. It may be preceded in the 2nd degree while it stands independent and after it, that is, without a straight mark inserted above or below it. By inserting a straight mark once, twice, or three times, then (1) it increases its signification five times, by inserting two straight lines, three times more. By inserting three straight lines, five times more. By inserting four straight lines, six times more. By increasing the number of straight lines and proceeding them, one will have the degrees of comparison. There are five connecting parts of speech in the above character, called La-bron in Aramaic. These five connecting parts of speech, for verbs, participles, participial prepositions, conjunctions, and addresses.

In translating this character, the subject must be continued until there are as many of these connecting parts of speech used as there are connections or connecting parts found in the character. That when the character is found with one horizontal line, as in (1), the subject must be entirely continued. Since the number of connecting parts of speech are used, or the full sense of the writer is not conveyed. When two horizontal lines occur, the number of connecting parts of speech are continued five times further, or five degrees. And when three horizontal lines are found, the number of connections in it is increased five times further. The character also has 5 parts of speech: increase by one straight line this $7.5^2$.
the Kirtland Egyptian Papers was penned by Joseph Smith himself (see p. 531, fig. 64). Why, then, does this most ambitious work have no title page if Smith wrote or dictated it?

3. Stranger still, Joseph Smith is nowhere designated as the author. He always took full responsibility for what he wrote or dictated, as when in taking over the editorship of the *Times and Seasons* he took pains to make clear just who was responsible for what. Even scriptures revealed through him bear his name conspicuously at their head. However reticent his disciples may have been, the Prophet knew that it was important to establish the authorship of any inspired writing.

4. The grammar and spelling throughout the book are very nearly perfect, which means that they are not Joseph Smith’s. This book is in the hands of a literate writer, Phelps, the best-educated man in Kirtland. How much of it is his and how much Smith’s remains to be seen and calls for investigation.

5. It was not the habit of Joseph Smith to suppress his revelations. He made every effort to see to it that each excerpt from the Book of Abraham was published to the world the moment it was presentable. “One cannot read the pages of the early periodicals of the Church,” writes Clark, “... without being impressed with the fact that to Joseph Smith, availability of the new revelations of God where people could read them and immediately profit by their instruction was more important than the technicality of having a complete text of these ancient records at the start.” Hence, Clark notes, it was

---

*of Joseph Smith, jr.” (pp. 58, 188); 1832 History: “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.” (pp. 4, 9).


46. [Egyptian Ms. #4 is partially in the handwriting of Joseph Smith, which can be dated as early as October 1835. Ms. #6 is a notebook with Joseph Smith’s signature. This too could be as early as October 1835. Presently the level of Joseph Smith’s influence in the other Egyptian mss. cannot be determined with certainty—eds.]
his custom to publish them in the form of extracts as he went along. But none of our Kirtland Egyptian Papers was ever published in any form; no one is challenged to put these writings to the test, as all the world was invited to examine the facsimiles and their explanations; no claims of revelation are made for them; no one claims authorship for them; no one is invited to inspect or comment or criticize. Those who have peddled the papers publicly have advertised them as “suppressed for 130 years.” If they were suppressed they can hardly be given the status of official documents, let alone that of a standard work. If the brethren were invited to try a hand at inspired writing and translation, to “study it out in your mind; then . . . ask me if it be right” (D&C 9:8), we need not be surprised if all sorts of speculative papers, diagrams, and word jugglings turn up as remnants of such preliminary study. It would be surprising, rather, if they did not. Even if the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were the work of Joseph Smith, their existence would not refute his claims to revelation unless by his own declaration they represent his own inspired translation of specific Egyptian texts. As it is, the A&G in the handwriting of Phelps was published by indiscriminating editors, who mingled it with the pages of three other versions of an A&G which we must consider before we decide which, if any, is the responsibility of Joseph Smith.

**Egyptian Mss. #3, #4, and #5**

In addition to the bound A&G, the Church Historian’s Office possesses three other documents which have been labeled Egyptian Mss. #3, #4, and #5. All share common contents with each other and with the A&G, but each has its own special interpretations. Ms. #3, in the handwriting of Phelps, consists of four pages, 7 ¾ by 12 ½, each written on one side of the paper only. It starts out bravely on page 1 with what it calls “Egyptian Alphabet first degree”; the page is carefully ruled into four

columns which are headed, from left to right “Character,” “letter,” “sound,” and “Explanation” (fig. 62). Twenty-three hieratic signs are listed in the “Character” column; each one to be transliterated in the “letter” column into our alphabet, given its phonetic value in the next column, and finally received a single “explanation” of one short line. The system is quite different from the one followed in the A&G. The one-line explanations are carried on for the first page and for ten characters on the second page, but there they come to a stop: the next nineteen characters (the list of twenty-three being repeated over and over again under different “parts” and “degrees”) have their “sound” indicated, but no equivalent English “letter,” and no “explanation” is offered for any of them. For the next seventeen characters, including the first seven on page 3, not even the sounds are given. Thus—as in the A&G proper—this great project begins to fizzle out on the second page, and grinds to a halt on the third. It is significant that this document, like the A&G, is in the handwriting of Phelps.

An alphabet designated by the Church Historian’s Office as “Egyptian Ms. #4, cit. 1837” may well be in Joseph Smith’s own hand (fig. 63). It is on the same type and size of paper as Phelps’s Egyptian Ms. #3 and, like it, occupies four pages.48 But there is an important difference between the two texts.

48. [The alphabet appears on only four of the nine pages of Egyptian Ms. #4—eds.]
Alphabet: first degree

**Explanation**

- **Ah**
  - The first being, who exercises supreme power.
  - The first man, or one who has highest power, or being.
- **Pha**
  - The first man, or one with highest power, or being.
  - Men of high rank, or great power, or being.
The first being who exercises superior power shall be the first man or one who has kingship power. He shall be more universal than having godlike dominion. The king shall place kernels of royal family royal blood or pharaoh or supreme powerking crown of a princes or queen or stands for queen Egypt unmarried or the principle of nature. Noah took man the name of a royal family in female line. Ze’oofah An unmarried woman and a virgin person to see if young unmarried man a price. Ze’oofah married or unmarried daughter have cop had crown of a prince or king one who or the the Earth. Some take or to be the non-co beneath or underworld into the eye or to see or sight 000 times me myself unless not. Ze’oofah in the land of Egypt first sunny day the 15th where other person is that or who. Noah is a cop place moon place a government power a kingdom. Ze’ool Zool Ch in the beginning first before anything to Zool Ch in the beginning of the constitution to Zool Ch signifies to be in an as light as it. Ze’ool the first Creation of anything first ever in Zool Ze’ool Zool from the first to any stated period after Zool from any or some pre-period of time to the beginning.

The second part first degree.

Almighty God without beginning or end. Almighty in the beginning with God the Son of Almighty as one disembodied Heavenly Father entire Almighty as an unattainable movement. Almighty ministers of God high presidency. Almighty ministers of God under the leg. Almighty ministers not ordained of God. Almighty ministers who are leg in full form of Baeth the name of all mankind man or. Baeth Ka Adam or the first man of first kind Baeth Ka the next from Adam on obedient and Baeth Ka the fourth from Adam.
Figure 63. Egyptian Ms. #4, pp. 1, 2. An “Egyptian Alphabet” [partially] in the handwriting of Joseph Smith. Note (1) that the Egyptian signs are arranged according to form—vertical, horizontal, diagonal, etc.—and that the explanations are systematic classifications (a) of the hierarchy of royal power and its establishment in the land (part one), and (b) of heavenly power and its transfer to mankind (second part); (2) that the text differs in many particulars from that of W. W. Phelps; (3) that only twenty-three symbols are considered in each part, while the “second part” does not go beyond Aleph and Beth, the first two letters of the alphabet. From this it would appear that we have here a perfectly sane and rational approach to a problem, that the approach is experimental and not authoritarian, and that it was abandoned at an early stage.
In the “Joseph Smith” version the columns for “letters” and “sounds” are entirely missing. The Phelps project is plainly the more ambitious of the two.

A third alphabet text (Egyptian Ms. #5) is, like the others, of four pages only, on the same paper and obviously produced as part of the same campaign. It is in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. The interesting thing is the way the three men disagree in their interpretations, each going his own way. Take for example the one sign that is constantly being rehashed in all the grammar and alphabet writings, the well-known reed-sign ⳻, perhaps the most important and certainly the commonest of all hieroglyphic symbols. A special treatment of the reed-sign is tacked on at the end of each of the three copies. A comparison of the three texts is instructive.

Egyptian Ms. #3, p. 4 (Phelps):
Za ki on=hish, or Kulsidon hish, The land of the Chaldees
Za ki an hish Ah=brh oam, the father of the faithful
the first right, unto whom is com
mitted

Egyptian Ms. #4, p. 4 (Smith):
Ah broam
 Ah bra oam. Signifies father of the faithful. The
first right. The elder

Egyptian Ms. #5, p. 3 (marked as p. 4) (Cowdery):
Zakiean-hiash, or Kulsidoan hiash—The land of the
Chaldeans.

49. [Although not titled “sounds,” in the Joseph Smith version, the characters are transliterated. It is evident another line for a column is drawn later as it overwrites the explanations—eds.]
50. [This line appears to be treating the character before the reed-sign—eds.]
51. [Minor transcription errors corrected—eds.]
52. [Minor transcription errors corrected—eds.]
53. [Minor transcription errors corrected. This line appears to be treating the character before the reed-sign. “Kulsidoan hiash” has been mended—eds.]
Each of these is interpreting the same sign, with no sovereign mastermind to bring them to a unity of the faith. Cowdery and Phelps hear different sounds and come up with different meanings. And Joseph freely lets them go their way while he goes his, each under obligation to “study it out in your mind” before asking for revelation. This is something that anti-Mormon writers have willfully misinterpreted from the first. Why, they have asked, would a prophet have to speculate and sweat like anybody else? Here is Brigham Young undertaking long and costly experiments to see whether corn or peaches or sugar beets or silkworms would thrive in the Great Basin. Some crops withered away, and others, contrary to the predictions of all the experts, flourished magnificently. If Brigham was a prophet, his enemies said, why didn’t God spare him the trouble of all that trial and error by giving him all the answers right at first? To which he answered, Why should God do that? Brigham and the people were all the wiser for their experience and, as the Mormons have always taught, our express purpose in coming to this earth is to gain just such experience. All his life Joseph Smith dealt with ancient documents, constantly stretching his own mind to bridge the gap of the unknown and then calling upon the Lord when a problem exceeded his powers. It is thus that we grow in knowledge and understanding.

Not a Key to Translation

All the grammar and alphabet projects viewed so far aborted dismally; none of them could ever have been used even as an imaginary basis for constructing the story of Abraham. Consider a few points:

1. The A&G (Egyptian Ms. #1) is a bound book, still complete with no pages missing.54 Yet only 34 pages have writing on them while 186 are left blank. The written pages

54. [Subsequent research has revealed that the bound book does have signatures missing—eds.]
do not, however, run consecutively, but are scattered at intervals throughout the book, an average of 3 written pages being followed by 18 to 20 blank ones. Thus only about one-sixth of the intended operation was completed. The blank pages, carefully arranged and set apart for the other five-sixths, were never used. The A&G is thus a work barely begun, but that is not all—even the written part is but a timid preliminary, for

2. the A&G contains only one page of grammar, and that is limited to a discussion of degrees of comparison. These degrees are referred to in dealing with the symbols that make up the alphabet, and yet

3. the alphabet that follows consists of only thirty symbols. With hundreds of hieroglyphic and thousands of hieratic symbols to choose from, the author limits himself to only thirty of them. Why, since he is by no means bound by the conventional definition of an alphabet, does he stop with thirty?

4. And why, of the thirty symbols, is only one—the first one—completely explained? And why does he exhaust his ingenuity explaining that one (the reed-symbol, of course) no less than fifteen times, each time with a different shade of meaning? Some of the other symbols get short explanations, and these too are explained over and over again, each in its various “parts” and “degrees” while retaining its basic meaning. Even so, only half a dozen hieratic symbols are explained and all the rest of the magnificent accumulation of signs at the disposal of our scholars is ignored.

5. Stranger still, the signs that are explained are not found in the actual Egyptian documents, where there is no evidence of the placing of one, two, or three strokes above a sign, for example, and where there is nothing whatever to indicate the remarkably ogham-like arrangement of symbols in the A&G. And while the fascinating hieroglyphs that flank Facsimile 1 are duly noted and repeatedly listed, they receive no treatment at all, even though they are real
pictures and far more suggestive of ideas than anything in the hieratic lists. What is more, the signs treated in the “grammatical” texts are not the signs that turn up in the margins of Book of Abraham Mss. #1, #2, and #3, from which signs the Book of Abraham is supposed to have been copied. The point we wish to make here is not that the stuff is confused and nonsensical, but that it never came anywhere near approaching a point at which its author could pretend that the one-page grammar and the six-letter alphabet were serviceable.

6. It is maintained by Howard and others that the A&G is “Joseph Smith’s working papers,” showing us the toilsome and tedious steps of a creative work in progress. Working papers in the form of a bound volume, neatly written out in final and unalterable form? Working papers in a fair hand, without smudging, erasing, rewriting, without additions or alterations? Working papers without a dot set down by the intervening hand of Joseph Smith? In short, working papers that show no signs of any work, but rather reflect the scribal exercise of copying down an already completed text, free of any evidence of hesitation or deliberation? We have in the whole A&G fewer words than are contained in the average magazine feature-story—about thirteen typewritten pages. Can this represent long years of coming to grips with the Book of Abraham? This might be the final result of a lot of work—but the actual process of years of toil, the working papers of Joseph Smith? That is utter nonsense.

7. For what has the A&G to do with the Book of Abraham? In the “explanations,” six incomplete and disconnected phrases from the text of the Book of Abraham are quoted, and that is all (Abraham 1:2, 3, 23, 26; 2:3, 5). These are not sentences but simply very brief expressions taken

55. [Nibley is referring to the unmarked column to the right of the characters—eds.]
56. [See for example, Abraham 1:2 = A&G p. 3; Abraham 1:3 = A&G p. 3; Abraham 1:23 = A&G pp. 4, 5; Abraham 1:26 = A&G p. 5?; Abraham 2:3]
out of context. They appear with proper meaning and context in the Book of Abraham, but only in a fragmentary and disconnected state in the A&G, which makes it perfectly clear that the Abraham text was already completed at the time these expressions were borrowed from it to help make the grammar. All the words quoted from the Book of Abraham in the A&G put together make up less than the bulk of the single verse Abraham 1:2. The idea that the Book of Abraham was worked out from, or even with the aid of the A&G, is simply ridiculous.

8. Because of the peculiar system of classes and degrees, almost every passage in the A&G appears more than once, and most of the symbols are given more than one interpretation. Thus Parrish gives five different explanations of the “Kolob” sign. Whatever the nature of the game these gentlemen are playing, it is of no help to a translator when any symbol can, without the slightest alteration, take on half a dozen different meanings. Which are we to take as the official translation?

9. Where do we find any evidence that any of the apparatus of the A&G was ever put to use? What are we to make of the total neglect of the more than 120 exotic names found in the pages of the A&G, none of which ever finds its way into the Book of Abraham?57 The Book of Abraham is much concerned with numbers: why do none of the 79 surviving

---

57. Seven of the names appear in the explanation to Facsimile No. 2, but that is a modern explanation and not a translation of an ancient text. The point is not whether the names are supposed to be authentic but whether they were used in composing the Book of Abraham. [Only “Kolob” is used in the A&G (pp. 24, 25, 28, 30, 32), the Book of Abraham (3:3, 4, 9, 16; 5:13), and in the explanation to Facsimile 2 (figs. 1, 2, 5). Six other terms are used in the A&G and in Facsimile 2 (but not in the Book of Abraham): fig. 1, “Jah-oh-eh” (A&G pp. 24, 27, 29, 31, 33); fig. 2, “Oliblish” (A&G 24, 31); fig. 5, “Enish-go-on-dosh” (A&G pp. 24, 30), “Kae-e-vanrash” (A&G pp. 24, 27), “Floese” (A&G pp. 25, 27, 30, 31),
symbols or the ingenious names which designate the Egyptian numerals in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers ever show up in the Book of Abraham? Why, if the “alphabet” was devised for the translating of the book, do none of the 30 symbols of that alphabet have anything to do with it, except for 5 astronomical symbols in Facsimile 2? A Homeric grammar is based on Homer, a New Testament grammar on the New Testament; but the A&G and other papers supposedly based on the Egyptian texts of the Book of Abraham are almost entirely filled with stuff that has no relationship to the Book of Abraham as we have it.

**Translations with Egyptian Symbols**

Now we come to the critics’ Exhibit A, those manuscripts taken from the stolen film and published to the world as absolute proof that Joseph Smith did not translate Egyptian but mistook the Book of Breathings for the story of Abraham. We refer to two manuscript copies of the first chapter and part of the second chapter of the Book of Abraham which contain in their left-hand margins a number of hieratic symbols. The critics assume the English text to be a translation of the Egyptian characters. This is taking a lot for granted, even on the evidence of the two manuscripts, which go in the Church Historian’s Office under the titles of Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3.\(^{58}\) Let us consider them before turning to the more important Book of Abraham Mss. #1 and #4,\(^{59}\) which were not available to our pirates.

1. The first thing we notice about the Egyptian symbols in the margins is that they are not the symbols found in the A&G and related works. If the Book of Abraham is supposed to be based on the latter, then these hieratic characters cannot be considered as its source. And there is

and “Kli-flos-is-es” (A&G pp. 25, 28, 30, 32). These six names have no relationship to the Book of Abraham—eds.]

58. [Ms. numbers corrected—eds.]
59. [Ms. numbers corrected—eds.]
no reason why they should be, aside from the argument of mere juxtaposition.

2. But the position of the symbols raises more doubts than confidence: there are not nearly enough of them; they are much too far apart. Much capital has been made of the ridiculous disproportion between the eighteen brief hieratic symbols, which take up just two short lines of the Book of Breathings, and the long and involved history of Abraham which is supposedly derived from them. It is as if one were to detect evidence of fraud in the absurd disproportion between the page number on this page and the mass of print that goes along with it—can a little number possibly contain all that information? Well, is it supposed to? The clever men in Kirtland who wrote these strange documents had studied ancient languages and were quite as capable of noticing and pointing out such discrepancies as are the learned editors of the *Salt Lake Messenger*. For this we have good evidence in two Kirtland documents which deserve a brief side trip.

The “Valuable Discovery” and Its Twin. The only document among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers that bears the signature of Joseph Smith is a booklet (Egyptian Ms. #6) that has been made by doubling over six strips of tough, thin, unlined paper to form a brochure of 12 pages, 6 by 7 7/8 inches, sewn together along the fold. On the outside of the binding, which is made of a sheet of thinner and darker tissue paper and has slightly larger dimensions, is written in a bold scrawl: “Valuable Discovery of hiden recrds that have been obtained from the ancient buring place of the Egyptians. Joseph Smith Jr.” (fig. 64). On the first of the following pages are 17 lines of Egyptian text, rather poorly copied hieratic characters from a funeral document. Under this in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery is a brief note stating where the text was found. There is no attempt at translation or interpretation. The next page contains seven more lines of the same Egyptian text and nothing else—not a word of English. The third and last page contains two brief notes in Cowdery’s hand on the chronology
Figure 64. Egyptian Ms. #6. Joseph Smith has put his signature on the front cover of an Egyptian text which he labels a “Valuable Discovery.” The text itself, however, consists of only two pages of hieratic copied down in a modern hand, without any translation, and a note, in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery, about a princess “Katumin” who is supposed to have lived a thousand years after Abraham and so has nothing to do with his story.
of a certain Princess Katumin, the first note preceded by three
and the second by two unrecognizable characters. Since each
note begins with the name of Katumin, one wonders how the
name could be derived from totally different symbols. Was it
supposed to be?

Along with the “Valuable Discovery” booklet goes an-
other (Egyptian Ms. #7) made exactly like it of the same kind
of paper and with the same type of cover, this time bearing
the scrawled name of “Williams” on the back, as well as the
initials “F G W.” So this would seem to be Frederick G. Wil-
liams’s work—only it is not, for the book inside is written
in the hand of Phelps. Cowdery may have been acting as
Joseph’s scribe in creating Egyptian Ms. #6; was Phelps the
scribe for Williams? We can’t take the name on the cover of
either of these books as proof of authorship.

On page 1 of Egyptian Ms. #7, in Phelps’s hand, we find
word for word the same two statements about the Princess
Katumin as appear on the last page of the Cowdery version
(Phelps calls her “Kah-tou-mun” in his alphabet or Egyptian
Ms. #3); only this time the enigmatic characters supplied by
Cowdery are missing—Phelps has none of them. Instead he
adds an extremely important note by entitling his treatise on
the princess “A Translation of the next page” (fig. 65). Here at last
is the only known case in which a specific English text is said
to be a translation of a specific given Egyptian document. The
“next page” in question is a numbered page in a bound book, so
there can be no mistake about it. Phelps wants us to believe that
the Egyptian text on that page is the original story of Katumin.
A Translation of the First Page

Matarnia, Princess, Daughter of Oos-Tas of Egypt, was born and began to reign in the year of the world, 2762. Matarnia was born in the 18th year of the reign of her father, and died when she was 28 years old, when was 3020.

[Diagram of a figure with inscriptions, possibly Egyptian hieroglyphs.]

(By this stood the figure)

J. H. Hooper.
And it gives us a pleasant surprise when we turn to it, for to match the four short lines of Phelps's English text he gives us a good three-plus lines of Egyptian text, thus preserving a very nice balance between the number of words in each. Here he leaves no possible doubt that he considers a decent proportion advisable between his Egyptian and English texts.

This is important because the disproportion between the length of Egyptian signs and English sentences is labored as the principal argument against the Book of Abraham, and the most important evidence for this is Book of Abraham Ms. #2 in the handwriting of the astute and sensible Phelps [Frederick G. Williams]. One needs no knowledge of Egyptian to point out that a dot and two strokes can hardly contain the full message of an English paragraph of a hundred words or more. In 1967 a Mr. Heward passed around handbills at a general conference pathetically asking, “Why should anyone want to fight the truth?”—the “truth” being his own great discovery that if somebody translates a single dot as the story of Little Red Riding Hood something must be out of joint: “Could a single dot carry that much meaning?” Mr. Heward asked with eminent logic. We are asked to believe that this point escaped all the smart men of Kirtland, who persisted for no reason at all in deriving a whole book from less than two dozen signs, when they had thousands of such signs to draw from, and thereby achieved such monumental absurdity as no child could fail to notice. In 1970 Messrs. Howard and Turner bring forth as the crowning evidence against Joseph Smith Mr. Dee J. Nelson’s sensational

60. [In the original BYU Studies article Book of Abraham Ms. #4 was noted. However, this was likely an error as Ms. #4 comes from the Nauvoo period, contains no hieratic characters, and is in the handwriting of Willard Richards. It is quite certain that Nibley meant Ms. #2 here, of which at that time W. W. Phelps was thought to be the scribe. But recent research has determined that the handwriting of this ms. actually belongs to Frederick G. Williams. Where Phelps is mentioned as the scribe of Ms. #2 it will be followed by Williams in brackets—eds].
find that the hieratic word *ms.t* is translated by Joseph Smith with a paragraph of 132 words.\(^\text{61}\) It never occurred to anyone to ask, in the glad excitement, whether this was really Joseph Smith's work and whether *ms.t* was ever believed by anyone to contain a story of 132 words. Actually, the text from which Mr. Nelson got his *ms.t* was written by Phelps [Williams] (it is Book of Abraham Ms. #2), and we have just seen that Phelps knew very well how the texts should balance up.\(^\text{62}\) Maybe there is something the critics don’t know about.

3. Looking at the first page of each of our two Abraham manuscripts (Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3), we note that both are numbered “page 1”—the story begins here (figs. 66–67). But what do we find? The first line is introduced by

---

\(^{61}\) [Nibley seems to be referring to bottom of p. 3 and beginning of p. 4 of Ms. #2—eds.]

\(^{62}\) [Nibley is following Dean Jessee’s designation of Phelps as the scribe of Ms. #2. We now know Frederick G. Williams was the scribe. Despite Williams being the scribe (instead of Phelps), Nibley’s argument that these men understood proportion still holds—eds.]

Figure 66. Book of Abraham Ms. #2. In the handwriting of W. W. Phelps [F. G. Williams]. The finished state of the English text, showing no sign of correction or hesitation, shows that it was simply copied down and in no wise indicates a process of translation; while the conspicuous failure of the margin to adapt to the Egyptian characters indicates that they were added later. At the bottom of the page the whole last section (Abraham 2:3–5) is repeated without the benefit of the Egyptian symbols, implying that the impatient copyist has decided that he can do as well without them.

Figure 67. Book of Abraham Ms. #3. Though this is numbered page 1, it begins with a note on grammar, immediately followed *not* by the beginning of the Book of Abraham but by a passage well along in the story (Abraham 1:4). Note that this is a “fair copy” of an already finished text. Note also how the character in the middle of the page marks a new phase of the writing but has no reference whatever to meaning or content. Note that none of the other signs can be matched up with specific ideas or episodes or proper names, the latter occurring and reoccurring without the slightest regard for the Egyptian symbols.
Therefore to knowlege of the beginning of creation and also of the planets, and of the stars, as it was made known unto the fathers, hence I kept even unto this day.

And I shall endeavor to write some of these things, upon the receipt, for the benefit of my posterity, that shall come after me.

In the Lord God came the famine to fare upon the land of Canaan, where my grandfather lived, and I went to my father, yet because in the land of Egypt, the children. And it came to pass, that I was barefoot, and took bread to eat, hence when my brother took Melchizedek for wife.

Who was the daughter of Aaron.

Now the Lord had said unto me, Abram, go out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee. Therefore I left the land of Canaan, and I took my brother, and his sons, and devised with them, and also my father, and we went into the land which ye see, which is Canaan.

And my father, born in Haran and dwelt there, and there were many flocks in Haran; And my father took unto his wife.

Therefore he continued in Haran, and dwelt there, and my brothers were increased unto the city, and that land could not

Now the Lord had said unto me, Abram, go out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee. Therefore I left the land of Canaan, and I took my brother, and his sons, and devised with them, and also my father, and we went into the land which ye see, which is Canaan.

And my father, born in Haran and dwelt there, and there were many flocks in Haran; And my father took unto his wife.

Therefore he continued in Haran, and dwelt there, and my brothers were increased unto the city, and that land could not
my father having turned from the righteousness and from the holy commandments which the Lord their God had given unto them unto the worshiping of the gods of the heathens;

utterly refusing to hearken to my voice for their hearts were set as evil and unrighteous turned to the god of Ammon and the god of Sibrah and the god of maachah and the god of them the chief of Egypt.

Therefore they turned their hearts to the sacrifices of the heathens in offering up their children as their burnt offerings and burnt them not unto my voice, but endeavored to take away my life by the hand of the priest of Ammon.

The priest of Ammon was also the priest of Pharaoh now at this time it was the custom of the priest of Pharaoh the king of Egypt to offer up upon the altar which was built in the land.
an Egyptian symbol, right enough, but opposite that symbol is not a line from the Book of Abraham but the words

second
sign of the fifth degree of the first part.

And then the next line is introduced by another Egyptian symbol and begins with the words

mine
I sought for the appointment whereunto unto the priesthood.

Page 1 of both texts begins not with the story of Abraham but with the fourth verse—a whole column left out. What comes before is not the Abraham story but something about grammar, leaving no room for the preceding verses even if this were not marked “page 1.” Is this the way one begins translating a book?

4. Next we note that sign no. 3 (the third from the top) is placed over against the English text right in the middle of a sentence and squarely between two lines of “translation,” the writer thus leaving us in complete doubt as to just what lines are supposed to be translated from that sign. As it stands, the hieratic symbol cannot possibly be matched up with any particular sections, paragraph, sentence, or line of the Abraham story.

5. Compare this same symbol as it appears in Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3. In the latter we see within the bent arm of power a conspicuous circle with a dash inside it; circle and dash are completely absent, however, from Ms. #2. Can such a prominent feature be blithely ignored where every little dot and line necessarily speaks volumes? It seems

63. [On the first line, Nibley is using Ms. #3 for the spelling of “second.” In Ms. #2 it is spelled “seccond.” On the second line, two carats are added. In Ms. #2 the second carat is placed before “the”; in Ms. #3 the carat is after “the”—eds.]

64. [The third sign on the Ms. #3 is placed between Abraham 1 verses 4 and 5—eds.]
that accuracy of detail means little to our copyists, who are satisfied as long as the general configuration of a symbol is recognizable—not for translation purposes, patently, but as some sort of marker. In both manuscripts the Egyptian characters are placed throughout in exactly the same position with relationship to the English text, while considerable license is taken with the manner in which they are drawn, which indicates that they are meant as guides or markers of some sort rather than as containing every detail of the long and involved text. This is borne out if we consider the next symbol.

6. Symbol no. 4 in Book of Abraham Ms. #3\(^65\) stands opposite what looks like a new paragraph or section. The preceding line ends abruptly in the middle of the page and even has a period to finish it. And sure enough there is a brand-new Egyptian symbol in the margin to start us off with a new idea or story. Only one thing is wrong: what should be the new section or paragraph begins right in the middle not just of a sentence but of a clause, its opening words being “utterly refused to hearken . . . .” What our Egyptian character marks in this case is not an idea, a word, a phrase, sentence, or paragraph, but the point at which a scribe takes up his pen—right in the middle of a sentence. Again, the writers of Mss. #2 and #3 make no effort to have their hieroglyphic signs agree in anything but general appearance: a carefully partitioned circle in one is but a hasty loop in the other.

7. Seven lines down from this symbol in Ms. #3 our scribe (Warren Parrish) begins a new paragraph,\(^66\) and rightly so, since at this point a new theme is introduced, a discussion of human sacrifice (Abraham 1:7). Here if ever is the proper place for an Egyptian symbol to tell the new story—but there is none! The author of the English version is utterly

\(^{65}\) [Ms. number corrected—eds.]

\(^{66}\) [Although Ms. #2 does not begin a new paragraph at this same point, both mss. do match a new paragraph with the next sign—eds.]
indifferent to any possible Egyptian writing that might supply him with the needed information. First a character where none should be and then no character where such is indispensable—our scribes make not even the crudest, most elementary effort to match up their “translations” with their purported sources.

8. Look at the next sign, no. 5. It is placed in Abraham Ms. #3, p. 1, exactly between the lines:

“... the hand of the priest of Elkkener
Sign
the priest of Elkkener was also the prie=

Plainly it does not mark the beginning of a new section or the introduction of a new idea, for the two lines practically repeat each other. But turning to Ms. #2 and the same sign we find that this scribe begins a new section at this point: he does not end the preceding section with a period, but simply breaks off in the middle of a line; and he does not begin the next line with a capital, but he does indent it. Why no punctuation? Because there is no break in the meaning. Why then the interrupted line and the new indentation, both completely ignored by the writer of Ms. #3? Because at this point the writer resumes operations—[i.e. the character is a marker for the point at which the scribe takes up his pen—eds.]. Again the two copyists make no effort to have their Egyptian symbols match in detail; indeed one must look twice to detect the resemblance between their marks—an unthinkable situation if they thought that every Egyptian squiggle and dot was loaded with detailed information. Halfway between symbols nos. 4 and 5 Parrish has marked what looks like a small equal sign in his margin, but there is no such mark in the other

67. [Minor transcription errors corrected—eds.]
68. [The two lines in Ms. #2 read as follows: “of the priest of Elk=ken=er/
The priest of Elk=Keenah was also the priest” Note that the second line does begin with a capital—eds.]
manuscript—another indication that the marginal signs do not supply the meaning of the text.69

9. If we look to these symbols for our translation, symbol no. 4 [in Ms. #3—eds.] showers us with a generous catalogue of exotic proper names—Elkkenir [Elkkener],70 Libnah [Zibnah],71 Mahmachrah,72 and the god of Pharaoh King of Egypt—and tells us how the people hardened their hearts to the preaching of Abraham, how the heathen offered their children to idols, how the priest of Elkkena [Elkkener] (mentioned for the second time, with an alteration in spelling)73 tried to put Abraham to death, etc. It is quite a story for one little picture to convey, especially when the copyists don’t particularly care about details in drawing it. The next sign, no. 5, is a very simple affair—two straight dashes, a circle, and a tiny T-shaped figure—but it manages to convey the name of Pharaoh no less than four times, once specifically as “Pharaoh King of Egypt” (without giving any credit to sign no. 4); then it goes on to tell about an altar built in the land of Chaldea, about human sacrifice to “the god of Pharaoh” (another steal from sign no. 4), about Shagreel (his name repeated twice) who was identified with the sun, about the rites at Potiphar’s Hill in the Plain of Olishem—all that jammed into four strokes and a circle—a circle which the two manuscripts draw quite differently. The same phrases and images seem to be represented by a series of quite different signs, and when we get to sign no. 8, though it is quite different from the other characters, it brings us right back to our old friends Elkken, Zibnah,74 Mahmachrah,

69. [This likely unintentional mark on Ms. #2 does not appear to be an equal sign—eds.]
70. [Transcription of name corrected—eds.]
71. [Both Williams and Parrish render “Libnah” as “Zibnah”—eds.]
72. [Transcription of name corrected—eds.]
73. [Nibley renders the second occurrence of “Elkenah” at the end of the line as “Elkkena.” However, the reading should be “Elkkener.” Although Elkenah is spelled consistently as “Elkkener” in Ms. #3, there are variant spellings of the name in Ms. #2—eds.]
74. [Transcription of “Elkenah” and “Libnah” corrected—eds.]
and the god of Pharaoh King of Egypt, with the Chaldeans thrown in for good measure. What goes on here? Couldn’t the translator remember what he had just translated? He didn’t need to, for it was right on the page before his eyes in his own handwriting. Yet he keeps on reading the same list of names and epithets by way of rendering totally different Egyptian characters, and having achieved a miracle of economy by squeezing gallons of juice out of one tiny lemon he does not make use of his precious symbol when he needs to express the same things again, but simply picks up any symbol that happens to be at hand and makes use of that. The basic rule of this grammar is that any Egyptian character will express any name or situation or combination of names or situations imaginable. If sign no. 5 tells us about the sacrifice of three virgins, sign no. 6 can tell us the same story all over again while assuming quite another shape. On the other hand, don’t ever worry about needing another symbol after one symbol has been milked for a minor epic—though there are thousands of characters available, you can forget about them and go on adding episode after episode to your one-symbol story: there is no limit to what you can read into it—one small symbol is “translated” by over 180 words. With such principles in operation, who cares about grammar? Why all this head-splitting about symbols when any symbol will do?

10. The fact is that there is no head-splitting. Nobody pays any attention to the Egyptian symbols; no Egyptian character is ever redrawn or corrected, or discussed or ever referred to in whole or in part. True, some symbols are discussed in the A&G, but not these symbols, and if one can imagine any principles of translation deducible from the A&G, it is impossible to discover any sign of their being applied in Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3.75

11. Prolonging our second glance at Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3, we are surprised and puzzled to note that

75. [Ms. numbers corrected. Nibley’s argument here would also apply to Ms. #1—eds.]
the text of the Book of Abraham before our eyes is written
down in a neat, flawless hand, without any signs of hesi-
tation or exasperation. Only a few minor touches distin-
guish it from our printed text of Abraham. As in the A&G,
everything is tidy and correct, with no signs of creativity or
normal pangs of composition, to say nothing of laborious
translation. No “working papers” of a difficult translation
ever looked like this. The copyists were writing down the
finished or nearly finished text of the Book of Abraham in a
fair, flowing, and uninhibited hand. They were not deriving
that text from, of all things, eighteen hieratic symbols writ-
ten in the margins.

12. The margins themselves show this: the margins
of the English text are remarkably straight and neat,
and it is at once apparent that the hieratic symbols must
adapt themselves to those margins, and not the other
way around. Thus on the last page of Book of Abraham
Ms. #2, Phelps [Williams] has kept a neat margin but one
more than twice as wide as necessary to accommodate the
Egyptian characters; this waste of space and paper would
have been avoided had he been adapting his margin to the
hieratic signs. On the other hand, on the last three pages
of Ms. #1 some Egyptian characters are squeezed right off
the page by a margin that is not wide enough for them,
and one jumps over the margin and intrudes a whole inch
on the space of the English text. Thus the margins always
accommodate the English text, but not the Egyptian sym-
bols. This can only mean that the English of the Book of
Abraham was here copied down before the Egyptian signs
were added. This was borne out further by the fact that
all the marginal Egyptian writing is supplied by a single
hand, an expert at copying them, and not by the writers of
the English text.76 There is no evidence that Joseph Smith
translated the Book of Abraham from Egyptian symbols in

76. There are two styles of writing, a thin line drawing and a heavy
brushlike stroke, a good imitation of the original. At least all the draw-
these documents—they were not written by him, and the Abraham text is not derived from them.

13. In Book of Abraham Ms. #2 the writer, after reaching Abraham 2:5, decides to dispense with Egyptian writing altogether. He gives up the margin in the middle of the page and even goes back and recopies verses 4 and 5 without margins, after which he goes on with the Abraham story without the benefit of margins or hieroglyphs. How could he thus depart from his source? What source? Ms. #2 drops the Egyptian at Abraham 2:5, and Ms. #3 ends abruptly in the middle of the page with the end of verse 2. In no known document is the exercise with Egyptian characters carried beyond the middle of chapter 2. What, then, is the source of the other two-thirds of the Book of Abraham? From what Egyptian text was the rest derived? Certainly not from the Book of Breathings, whose limits are clearly marked. If Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3 are to be accepted as evidence of Joseph Smith’s folly, we still have to explain the bulk of the Book of Abraham.

A strange line of reasoning sees in the sequence of the signs in the margins “the key to an authentic appraisal of the process by which the Book of Abraham text was formulated by Joseph Smith.” The discovery that those signs not only come from the Book of Breathings but actually occur alongside the English text in the same order as in the Egyptian was hailed as a triumph of perspicacity. But if the Mormons decided to use Egyptian symbols for any purpose, what could be more natural than to take them from the Egyptian documents in their possession—where else would they get them? And in making use of such symbols what easier and more natural way than just to copy them down in order? The most interesting characters of all—those which are not meaningless hieratic hen tracks, but real pictures—are repeatedly reproduced in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, in the order in which they occur on

ings of each type are by the same person, who may have tried his hand at both styles.

77. [See note 9 above—eds.]
the papyrus along with Facsimile 1 (the “lion couch”). Yet no attempt is made to translate any but two of the signs—the two (reed and “w,” of course) that are not recognizable pictures of anything. Why doesn’t Joseph Smith or anybody else ever attempt the easy, fun task of reading meaning into those that are eloquent little pictures? There seems to be an actual aversion to the idea of “translating” Egyptian symbols.

Book of Abraham Ms. #1

The text designated by the Church Historian’s Office as Book of Abraham Ms. #1 (fig. 68) gives every indication of being the parent and original of the series to which Mss. #2 and #3, just discussed, belong. Obtained by the Church from the late Wilford C. Wood, it is ten pages long, on paper 7 ¾ by 12 inches. It has never been published. At the top of the first page it bears the title: “Translation of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand upon papyrus and found in the Catacombs of Egypt.” And to give it further precedence over Mss. #2 and #3, this manuscript begins properly, with verse 1. It is, in fact, a most ambitious and impressive beginning. A three-quarter-inch margin is ruled off on the left and headed “caracter,” and the first two characters to appear in it are the ubiquitous reed and “w”-loop, which happen to be the signs with which the intact de Horrack papyrus of the Book of Breathings (Louvre No. 3284) begins, and the signs with which in all probability the damaged Joseph Smith Papyrus XI also began. To these two characters the writer of Book of Abraham Ms. #1 gives numbers 1 and 2, using those same numbers to designate particular

78. [Further examination has determined that Mss. #2 and #3 are earlier than Ms. #1. It is also possible that Ms. #2 is the earliest of the three mss. and that Ms. #1 is a copy of Ms. #3—eds.]

79. [Ms. #1 exhibits the handwriting of W. W. Phelps for Abraham 1:1–3. But the remainder of the ms. is in the handwriting of Warren Parrish. It is possible that Phelps’s part predates Mss. #2 and #3—eds.]
Translation of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand whose tablets are found in the Catacombs of Egypt.

In the land of the Egyptians at the residence of my father, J. Abraham, I saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence, and seeing there was greater happiness and peace, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the night wherein unto I should be entitled to administer the name; having been a follower of righteousness, aspiring to be one who hoped great kinds of a greater fellow of righteousness, a holder of greater knowledge; a friend of many nations; a prince of peace; and one who kept the commandments of God; a rightful heir; a high priest, helping the night belonging to the fathers, from the beginning of time, even from the beginning, or before the foundation of the earth, down to the present time; even the right of the first-born or the first-born, who is Adam, or first father, through. Through, unto me, I sought for mine appointment unto the priesthood according to the appointment of God, unto the fathers, concerning the deed.

my fathers having turned from their righteousness, and from the holy commandments, which the Lord had given unto them, unto the worshipping of the gods of the heathen.

Whoso refused to hearken to my voice, for their hearts were set to do evil; and were wholly turned to the gods of heathen and the god of lebanon and the god of.
words in the English text appearing directly opposite these signs, so that we get this:

$$1 \text{In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, } ^2\text{Abraham, } ^1\text{saw, that it was needful for me to obtain . . .}$$

Now throughout all the grammar and alphabet papers, the reed sign is given two meanings—namely, (1) “land of the Chaldeans” and (2) the act of seeing, while the loop or “w”-symbol is always said in some way or other to refer to Abraham. Hence there cannot be the slightest doubt that the writer here intends to relate specific Egyptian characters to specific English words and ideas. Now, this is the sort of demonstration for which we have been looking, in which things are properly pinned down. But alas, if this is the beginning of a rigorous demonstration, it is also the ending; for with the second line of the text the project is lamely given up—at that early stage of the game any further attempt to number Egyptian symbols by way of matching them with definite English equivalents is abandoned. The next four lines of text have no matching Egyptian symbols at all, and from then on such signs are scattered at the usual meaningless intervals.

80. [A few minor transcription errors corrected—eds.]

Figure 68. Book of Abraham Ms. #1. An attempt by W. W. Phelps to match Egyptian characters with specific English words is evident from the numbers placed beside the first two hieroglyphs ($j$ and $w$), the same numbers appearing before the English words In the land, Abraham, and saw, the basic meaning of the $j$ and $w$ signs according to the alphabet studies. It is quite evident that the plan was quickly given up, none of the following signs being treated in such a manner, which means that they are not being translated at all. W. Parrish takes over the writing in the middle of the page and marks his beginning with an Egyptian symbol, though he begins in the middle of a sentence. There is no discernable relationship between the symbols and the contents of the various sections of the text.
(that is, with no visible relationship to the meaning of the text) as in the other Book of Abraham manuscripts. Need we say that this auspicious but brief beginning to Book of Abraham Ms. #1 is in the hand of Phelps? And is it surprising that he peters out at line 18 of the first page, after which Warren Parrish takes over and completes the remaining fourteen lines on the page as well as the remaining nine81 pages of the manuscript? Phelps’s last symbol is three little strokes which go with twelve lines of text, and Parrish begins with a dot and three lines set against fourteen lines of English. That is not how the thing started out, with the first two symbols opposite consecutive lines with numbers to indicate just what in those lines the symbols were supposed to stand for. No, the serious business of “translation” has been given up, and what we have thereafter is either mere eyewash or the use of mysterious symbols to help the copyists in coordinating their work, or both. The brethren at that time were not averse to the use of code names and kabbalistic symbols in carrying on their business.

It is quite clear what happened on page 1 of Book of Abraham Ms. #1. The enterprising Phelps set out to apply the principles set forth in his copy of the A&G to his copy of the Book of Abraham and didn’t get to first base. In the same way he starts out grandly and folds up miserably with his impressive four-column “Egyptian Alphabet” (Egyptian Ms. #3). In view of his performance (and he is certainly our number one performer), it is impossible to maintain that he seriously attempted to carry on either his grammar or his translation beyond two symbols alone; only the first two—the reed and the “w”—were fully explained either in the grammars and alphabets or the Pearl of Great Price copies, and even Joseph Smith could not derive the whole Book of Abraham from those two symbols. When Parrish in Book of Abraham Ms. #1 places the “Chonsu”-sign beside 19 lines—182 words—of

81. [Corrected from “nineteen”—eds.]
English text, it is up to the critic to show that he or anybody else really thought of that as an exercise in translation. This last performance, incidentally, is followed by a new story, a new section, and a new paragraph, all properly indented and capitalized—but no Egyptian symbol in sight to provide the information. Opposite a heavy dot in the margin of page 2 is a long sentence containing a parenthetical remark (“Now the god of Shagreel was the Sun”), and we yearn to ask how the parenthesis and its contents are expressed in the dot. With pages 7 and 8 of Book of Abraham Ms. #1, things begin to get interesting. On page 7, Abraham 2:6 is rendered:

... bear my name unto a people which I will give in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee, for an everlasting possession when they hearken to my voice.

And on the next page, “I kn-ow the beginning [from] the end” is changed to read “I know the end from the beginning” (Abraham 2:8). Then a series of parenthetical remarks is inserted by Parrish:

... and in thee (that is in thy priesthood) and in thy seed, (that is thy priesthood) . . . after thee (that is to say thy literal seed, or the seed of thy body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed . . . (Abraham 2:11.)

In all of these passages not a word has been changed, words have been shifted around, and parenthetical remarks have
been inserted not to change but to clarify meanings. The end result is exactly as we find it in the printed edition of the Pearl of Great Price. Was the final text, then, taken from this copy? The next two pages show us that it was not, for there the following passages occur:

... And I took Sarai, whom I took to wife in Ur of Chaldea wife when I was ... Jer Jurshon, to come to the land of Canaan.86 (page 9)

This is quite different from the final text of Abraham 2:15:

And I took Sarai, whom I took to wife when I was in Ur, in Chaldea ... and came forth in the way to the land of Canaan.

Only at the end of the next verse do we get the rest of the sentence:

... by the way of Jershon, to come to the land of Canaan.87

And on the last page we read:

borders land of the 
... into the land of the ^ Canaanites, and 
... the land of this idolitrous nation.88

Compare this with Abraham 2:18:

... into the borders of the land of the Canaanites, and I offered sacrifice there in the plains of Moreh, and called

86. [Ellipses have been added to show that there is a large amount of text missing between “when I was” and “Jer Jurshon,” which corresponds to the published text. Line breaks have been added and minor transcription errors corrected—eds.]
87. [This text is also several lines down in the ms.—eds.]
88. [Ellipses have been added to show there is missing text (that matches Abraham 2:18) between “and” and “the land of.” Minor transcription errors have been corrected—eds.]
on the Lord devoutly, because we had already come into the land of this idolatrous nation.  

The end result in Ms. #1 is definitely not the official text. Thus Book of Abraham Ms. #1 has the marks of a work in progress, and we can be sure that the final confused and jumbled verse is as far as it got. It begins with Phelps’s setting out to give us a genuine analytical translation, but fizzles out on the first page; what follows is a simple straightforward copying of Abraham chapter 1 by Warren Parrish; with chapter 2 the writer begins casting about for better wording, rearranging but never changing words; on the last two pages his text differs from the present official version and ends up in a state of confusion, marking the end of the project at Abraham 2:18. It was copying, but copying with discussion. When a reading is changed in one of the three copies of Book of Abraham Mss. #1, 2, and 3, it is usually altered in the other two as well, showing that men were working together; but the end results are not always the same, as in Abraham 2:15, where the writer has written and then struck out the words that stand in Book of Abraham Ms. #4 and in the present official version. It is as if the scribes were being encouraged to think for themselves.

**Book of Abraham Ms. #4**

The Church Historian’s “Book of Abraham Ms. #4” bears on the back of it the date 1841 in the hand of Thomas Bullock, though the document itself is in the handwriting of Willard Richards (fig. 69). This writing, coming years after the others, is, as might be expected, closer to our present-day version than the others. It bears the title later appearing in the present official version.

---

89. [One typo corrected—eds.]
90. [Nibley’s reasoning is not altogether sound based on the above misreading of Ms. #1. Most of the corrections in the examples cited above, in the missing text too, are reflected in the published version. However, Nibley is still correct that Ms. #1 is not the official version—eds.]
The text is not legible due to the quality of the image. It appears to be a historical or religious document written in English. If you can provide a clearer image, I would be able to assist better.
in the *Times and Seasons* version of 1 March 1842, and the 1851 version published by Richards’s nephew Franklin D. Richards:

> A Translation of Some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands, from the Catacombs of Egypt, purporting to be the writings of abraham, while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand upon papyrus.

THE. BOOK. of ABRAHAM.91

On the back of the second page of Book of Abraham Ms. #4 is written: “A Fac-Simile from the Book of Abraham—/Explanation of the above cut.”92 The twelve explanations to Facsimile 1 then follow as they stand in the present Book of Abraham, except that the much-discussed philological explanation of item 12 is missing.93 Filed with Ms. #4 are also four pages, 8 by 10 inches, in the hand of Willard Richards, containing the explanations of Facsimile 2 exactly as found in our Pearl of Great Price. There is also a copy of the damaged Facsimile 2 on a slightly larger sheet of paper.

Book of Abraham Ms. #4 differs both from the other Book of Abraham manuscripts and from the final printed

---

91. [Line breaks added and minor transcription errors corrected—eds.]

92. [Line break and carat added—eds.]

93. [It is unclear what “much-discussed philological” material Nibley is referring to here. The explanation for item 12 is not missing in Ms. #4—eds.]
text. Thus we find Abraham 1:4 first disagreeing with the other versions and then corrected to agree with them:

I sought
unto the Priesthood
for mine appointment,\(^94\) according to the
unto the Priesthood, according unto the
the appointment,\(^94\) of God unto the

It is nothing more than the usual adjusting of the text, without the removal or changing of a single word, to get the clearest expression. Throughout this text are inserted pencil notations of page numbers from another manuscript,\(^95\) which included most of the third chapter of Abraham, parts of which are quoted with page numbers on an extra sheet (page 14) that has been added to our Ms. #4.\(^96\) Though Richards’s translation comes to a halt where the others do, the quoting of verses 18 through 22 of chapter 3 confirms that he is not here engaged in translation but, like the others, is copying from another manuscript, in which, however, all the copyists are allowed to introduce improvements.

The most significant thing about the Willard Richards manuscript is that while it is most explicitly designated as a translation of certain specific Egyptian records—and is accompanied by reproductions of Egyptian writings (the facsimiles) along with explanations of the same, showing the writer’s concern to give the fullest possible documentation—it contains not a single one of the hieratic symbols found in the margins of the 1835 manuscripts. This confirms, as noted above, that those marginal characters were not regarded as

\(^94\) [Line breaks added and minor transcription errors corrected—eds.]

\(^95\) [The inserted pencil notations are not page numbers from another ms., but are instead paragraph numbers that correspond to the paragraphing in the published version in the *Times and Seasons*. This ms. could be the printer’s copy to the initial installment—eds.]

\(^96\) [This extra sheet contains Abraham 3:18b–26a, is numbered pages 7 (recto) and 8 (verso), and is a separate ms. from Ms. #4, albeit it is kept in the same folder—eds.]
the Egyptian source of the text; if such an idea was ever entertained, by the time Richards produced Ms. #4, the latest and most authoritative of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, it had been completely abandoned.

All in all, Ms. #4 is the most “official” of the four copies and shows clearly the independence of these “translations” from the few Egyptian symbols that accompany the other versions. The rewording in all these manuscripts, far from showing the work of translation in progress, never changes a meaning or touches upon any basic issue of translation. No indication is ever given, no slightest hint is dropped at any time, that the Egyptian characters in the margins were appealed to in case of disagreement or during any discussion; no reference is found anywhere to the way in which those symbols might have been put to use in arriving at meaning; there is no evidence that anything in the A&G was put to use in these translations—indeed, the Egyptian symbols appearing in the A&G are not those found in the margins of the Pearl of Great Price copies. The claim that these documents show us exactly how the Book of Abraham was translated is the purest nonsense. Incidentally, the retouches in the text continued long after Kirtland. In our own time the important title of the 1851 edition was changed: “Translated from the Papyrus, by Joseph Smith” has been added, and the significant qualification “Records . . . purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt,” has been dropped.

**Mysterious Markings**

A variety of markings—letters, numbers, dashes, and dots—serve in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers to coordinate the work and avoid confusion as a number of people were

---

97. [In this section Nibley refers to “a series of capital letters” in blue ink that accompany many of the manuscripts. At this writing he does not know who it is and surmises it may be someone during Joseph’s time trying to identify and classify the mss. It is now quite certain that the]
dealing with the same material. As we have seen, the pages of the various series are numbered, and the pages of Book of Abraham Ms. #4 are coordinated by number with those of a missing manuscript. A series of capital letters, each with two strokes under it, runs through all the papers, placed there by a single hand, identifying each separate sheet, to avoid confusion. Not all the pages are so marked, and no effort is made to follow a rigorous order; thus six pages of Book of Abraham Ms. #3 bear the letters O through S, in proper order, but in reverse, while elsewhere the letters appear in the same order as the pages. The letters do not have any necessary relation to page numbers, the pages lettered A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, being matched by the numbers 6, ?, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, and blank, respectively in the A&G. Two loose two-page spreads, though marked with the usual underlined capital letters (this time T, U, and V), bear on each of their two pages capital Os and Ws respectively—not underlined.

In Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3, sometimes the capitals with strokes under them appear in the left-hand margins right along with the Egyptian symbols, which the unwary might easily confuse with them. This should admonish us that the position of a symbol next to a text does not necessarily prove that the text is a translation of the sign. It was entirely in keeping with the need to obscure the exotic nature of their work for the brethren to employ not only letters and numerals to mark off various phases of their undertaking, but to draw also on the wonderful Egyptian symbols that had so astonishingly come into their hands. To this day but few mid-Westerners have ever seen a real Egyptian papyrus, and for the genuine article to turn up in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835, is against all the rules of probability. Our copyists can take the hieratic symbols or leave them alone, and the same applies to the other symbols. Each type was added by

individual most likely responsible for adding the capital letters is Andrew Jenson—eds.]

98. [See note 97 above—eds.]
a single person, concerned not with interpretation but with bringing the work of a number of hands together in some sort of correlation.

What Is Behind All This?\footnote{\[In this section Nibley is operating under the assumption that the Abraham and Egyptian papers were produced in 1837 (or later) when some of the brethren were apostatizing from the Church and others were questioning Joseph Smith’s credibility as a prophet or as an educated man. We now know that the individuals who scribed these papers (especially the Abraham papers) did so as early as fall 1835. In fact, it is quite possible that most of these papers were created before 1837—eds.\]}

It would seem that Joseph Smith is working with the brethren, but they are doing a lot of things on their own. What strikes one first of all is the overpowering predominance of one hand and mind in the work—those of Phelps. In his handwriting is the bound A&G (Egyptian Ms. #1), a copy of the “Egyptian Alphabet” (Egyptian Ms. #3), the first half-page of the important Book of Abraham Ms. #1, and the “Katumin” document (Egyptian Ms. #7) which claims to be the actual translation of an accompanying text. Each of these writings is the most ambitious and revealing of its type. And was Phelps simply the faithful scribe? Far from it! Almost as soon as he met Joseph Smith he was made “printer unto the Church,” a title which, as Clark points out, meant far more than “that simply of a pressman.”\footnote{Clark, Story of the Pearl of Great Price, 24.} Before joining the Church Phelps had already been the editor of three newspapers (founder of two), employing his craft to broadcast the power of a universal mind. His biographer gives him the epithet of “versatile”—“printer, hymn writer, poet-journalist, newspaper editor, judge, orator, scribe, lawyer, educator, . . . pioneer, explorer, writer of books and pamphlets, topographical engineer, superintendent of schools, surveyor general, weather man, chaplain of the lower house of representatives, and speaker of the house.
though only thirty years old when he first met the Prophet, he had already been a candidate for the lieutenant-governorship of New York. Upon embracing the gospel he determined, as he puts it, “to quit the folly of my ways, and the fancy and fame of this world.”

But to renounce the vanity of the world is more easily said than done, and before half a year had passed Phelps had to be roundly rebuked by the Lord: “And also let my servant William W. Phelps stand in the office to which I have appointed him. . . . And also he hath need to repent, for I, the Lord, am not well pleased with him, for he seeketh to excel, and he is not sufficiently meek before me” (D&C 58:40–41). Phelps was not a man to subordinate himself, and in 1832 the Prophet warns him in a letter to take care lest “they that think they stand should fall.” On 14 January 1833, Joseph declared that Phelps represented “the very spirit which is wasting the strength of Zion like a pestilence.” Phelps was a wonderful man, but his weakness was vanity. At the time the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were being produced, the Prophet had to rebuke him again; but things had gone so far that Phelps soon turned against Joseph Smith and went about publicly stirring up trouble, and finally, in November 1838, signed a terrible and damning affidavit against the Prophet. Within two years, however, he confessed that his charges had been lies and begged to be taken back into the Church again. That took strength of character, and Joseph forgave him freely, as


102. Ibid., 24.

103. History of the Church, 1:299, letter of Joseph Smith to W. W. Phelps, 27 November 1832.

104. Ibid., 1:317.

he always forgave his enemies; he knew only too well Phelps’s one great fault—"he taketh honor unto himself." 106

Joseph Smith had a high regard for Phelps’s ability. In an encouraging and kindly note to the latter’s wife he had written that “few can compete with [his merits, experience, and accomplishments] in this generation.” 107 In his literary activities as editor of the Evening and Morning Star he was given a free hand: “If the world receive his writings—behold here is wisdom—let him obtain whatsoever he can obtain in righteousness, for the good of the saints” (D&C 57:12). They were his writings, not Joseph’s; even when the journal displeased the Prophet, who wrote to Phelps, “If you do not render it more interesting than at present, it will fall,” he was left to his own resources. 108 Claiming “a good education which included the Greek and Latin classics,” Phelps was quite aware that he was the best educated of the brethren. It was he who gave their grandiloquent titles to the Church leaders—Lion of the Lord, Wild Ram of the Mountains, Archer of Paradise, etc. 109 It was he who on 9 August 1831 saw “the destroyer riding upon the face of the waters.” 110 But his desire to be heard extended to matters of revelation as well as to scholarship. He also aspired to making inspired translations of the scriptures. Among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers is a small clothbound

106. B. H. Roberts, A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 1:506–7 n. 21. He gives the exchange of letters between Phelps and Joseph Smith on the occasion. The quotation is from a blessing given to Phelps by the Prophet on 22 September 1835; see Bowen, “Versatile W. W. Phelps,” 98.
110. Ibid., 33.
book inscribed “W. W. Phelps, Diary Vc. 1835,”111 containing original renderings of the Bible, of which the Church Historian writes: “These passages of Scriptures from the Bible do not appear to have any connection with the Inspired Revision by the Prophet Joseph Smith. This is no doubt the result of research and study done by Wm. W. Phelps.” And why not? Joseph Smith encouraged others to obtain all the gifts that God has bestowed on man. Thus in 1835 the promise was given to Warren Parrish through the mouth of Joseph Smith: “He shall see much of my ancient records and shall know of hidden things, and shall be endowed with a knowledge of hidden languages, and if he desires, and shall seek it at my hand, he shall be privileged with writing much of my word.”112 Plainly the right to undertake inspired translation was not limited to Joseph Smith but was extended to others, in particular the very scribes who produced the Kirtland Egyptian Papers.

There was jealousy, too. The situation is elucidated in a revelation of November 1831: “O ye elders of my church, . . . Your eyes have been upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and his language you have known, and his imperfections you have known; you have sought in your hearts knowledge that you might express beyond his language” (D&C 67:1, 5). The smart men around the Prophet were convinced that they could do a better job than he could in turning out inspired writings. And there were no restraints placed upon them as long as they went about it honestly. “It is your privilege”— they even receive the promise to share the same gifts as Joseph, but only to that degree to which “you strip yourselves from jealousies and fears, and humble yourselves, . . . for ye are not sufficiently humble” (D&C 67:10).

111. [W. W. Phelps’s diary is no longer kept with the Abraham/Egyptian materials—eds.]

There it is, plain as a pikestaff: the brethren were impatient with Joseph Smith’s lack of education and desired to improve on his performance. They had every right to do so, and were invited to try, but warned that they would not succeed as long as they were motivated by jealousy. So there is no reason why Cowdery, Phelps, and the others should not have tried their own hands at deciphering Egyptian. Upon receiving the above revelation, “William E. M’Lellin, as the wisest man, in his own estimation, having more learning than sense, endeavored to write a commandment like unto one of the least of the Lord’s, but failed.”  

Are not the Kirtland Egyptian Papers written by men who shared M’Lellin’s ambitions? Upon first viewing the papyri, Phelps had written to his wife: “These records of old times, when we translate them and print them in a book, will make a good witness for the Book of Mormon.” The editorial “we” here definitely includes himself—the Kirtland Egyptian Papers bear witness that no one tried harder to translate than he did, and there is a note of impatience if not petulance in the letter he wrote the lady six weeks later: “Nothing has been doing in translating of the Egyptian record for a long time, and probably will not for some time to come.”

In coming into the Church, Phelps had moved into what had previously been Oliver Cowdery’s intellectual domain of editing and writing, and a distinct rivalry between the two can be detected in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers. Even before the Church was organized, Cowdery had sought and been promised the gift of knowing things “concerning the engravings of old records . . . that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred” (D&C 8:1, 11). As always, certain conditions went with the promise, however: “According to your faith shall it be done unto you,” and “you shall

114. See Jessee, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 340.
ask . . . with an honest heart” (D&C 8:11, 1). That is why “in attempting to exercise this gift of translation, . . . Oliver Cowdery failed; and . . . the Lord explained the cause of his failure to translate”.116 “Behold, you have not understood; . . . you took no thought save it was to ask me” (D&C 9:7). Lack of perfect faith and honesty in Cowdery showed itself in the following year, when he had the presumption to write Joseph Smith a letter “‘Commanding’ him to alter one of the revelations which had been received.”117 Soon after that he was told that he had a right to speak by revelation whenever the Comforter led him, but that he was not to compete with the head of the Church in speaking with authority and that his writing was to be “not . . . by way of commandment, but by wisdom” (D&C 28:5). He had as good a right to use his wits as other men, but, like Phelps in his writing and translating, was prone to be carried away by vanity and fall on his face. Each man became increasingly jealous of the Prophet through the year 1837, and both finally had to be cut off from the Church, Cowdery at the autumn conference of 1837118 and Phelps in the following summer.119

Though he experienced a marvelous manifestation at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in March 1833, Frederick G. Williams “soon after . . . yielded to improper influences” and accordingly, on 7 November 1837, was “rejected as a counselor in the First Presidency.” He was not excommunicated until 17 March 1839, however, and was taken back into the Church a year after.120 During the period of writing the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, therefore, he was definitely turned

117. Ibid., 1:217.
118. Ibid., 1:431–34.
119. History of the Church, 3:46.
120. Andrew Jenson, Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Jenson, 1901), 1:52.
against Joseph Smith. As early as 1836 Warren Parrish was found embezzling $25,000 of the Safety Society Funds and began operations against President Smith, going about organizing the “Reformers” who went so far as to seize the temple and declare Joseph Smith a fallen prophet. Parrish had been found “guilty of sexual sin in Kirtland,” but “made confession to the church, and on promising reformation retained his standing.” He was not cut off from the Church until early 1838, when he became one of Joseph Smith’s bitterest enemies; he never returned to the Church. Thus the man who worked most closely with Phelps in turning out the Kirtland Egyptian Papers was one of those most strongly animated at the time by feelings of ambition, jealousy, and guilt.

Willard Richards, who did not even join the Church before 1837, was the one and only writer of Kirtland Egyptian Papers to remain true; and when the others left he took charge of what papers were available. Though he was “keeper of the records” and was in charge of all official documents, it is significant that the papers designated as “Egyptian Grammar” were not kept with the others in the iron-bound box which Elder Richards risked his life to save during a flash flood while crossing the plains, but were stored away by themselves in the trunk of his wife Jennetta. This alone puts them in a special category apart from the official documents of the Church; they were laid

121. [This cannot be the case since Frederick G. Williams was involved with the Abraham papers in fall 1835. Williams served as scribe for Joseph Smith’s journal 3–7 October 1835; see The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 67–71—eds.]
122. Comprehensive History of the Church, 1:404–6; see History of the Church, 2:528.
123. According to the official “Schedule of Church Records. Nauvoo 1846,” drawn up by Thomas Bullock for Willard Richards at the time of the exodus from Nauvoo. The story of the iron-bound box is dramatically recounted by Claire Noall, Intimate Disciple: A Portrait of Willard Richards (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1957), 489–91. [Mss. #2 and #3 were also in Jennetta’s trunk—eds.]
aside and never in any sense proclaimed official. He didn’t have all the papers, however; all along the Prophet had been more interested in dictating his own history to these same men than having them work on the Book of Abraham, and when they left him they took their work with them: “Twice Joseph had attempted to have his history recorded and published,” yet “in each case an apostate scribe had refused to surrender a partly prepared manuscript.”124 The important Book of Abraham Ms. #1 by Phelps was never among the papers that passed from Willard Richards to his nephew Franklin D. Richards, but was acquired by the Church in 1937 through the late Wilford Wood. The scribe apparently considered that he had a right to the thing as his own work.

Another Tentative Summary

The men who cooperated, more or less, to produce the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were impatient of Joseph Smith’s scholarly limitations and were at the same time invited by him to surpass them. In dealing with these men, the Prophet showed superhuman forbearance, freely forgiving them all their terrible offenses against him and inviting them back into the Church even when they did not ask it. In their literary work he gave them a free hand, sharing his idea with them and letting them make what use they pleased of his words. They were the “aspiring men,” the “great big Elders . . . who caused him much trouble”; “after he taught them in private councils, they would then go forth into the world and proclaim the things he had taught them, as their own revelations.”125 But still he put up with them, encouraging them to work along with him and improve his English.

Now when these men turned against Joseph Smith, at the very time that they were working on the Egyptian

Papers, they all started making public statements and signing affidavits in which they did their best to invent the most damning and withering charges they could to make the Prophet an object of ridicule and contempt as well as loathing in men’s eyes. Phelps, Cowdery, and Williams all admitted later that the charges were fabrications; but why at that time did not one of them, including the bitter Parrish, so much as even hint at the fiasco of the Egyptian translations? Because there was no fiasco: the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were as much their baby as Smith’s, and no matter who was responsible for them they contained nothing reprehensible, since no claims either of divine inspiration or of scholarly accuracy were made for them. The freedom of expression displayed by the various copyists shows plainly enough that the work was considered experimental.

Here we see the brethren, with the encouragement of the Prophet, casting about for suggestions and ideas, a course that was often recommended to them by the voice of revelation. Before God gives us the answer he expects us to be diligent seekers, even as Abraham was (Abraham 2:12): “We never inquire at the hand of God for special revelation,” said Joseph Smith, “only in case of there being no previous revelation to suit the case. . . . It is a great thing to inquire at the hands of God, . . . and we feel fearful to approach Him . . . especially about things the knowledge of which men ought to obtain in all sincerity, before God, for themselves, in humility by the prayer of faith.” The brother of Jared, at the Lord’s suggestion, attempted to produce a flameless light for his ships. He worked like a demon, exercising all his faith, ingenuity, and strength, and the result was a fiasco!

126. [Even with Nibley arguing (albeit incorrectly) that these papers were produced during a time when Phelps, Williams, Cowdery, and Parrish were against Joseph, the question of why they did not expose Joseph’s so-called fraudulent work with the Book of Abraham is still valid—eds.]

In words of total self-abasement he announced his humiliating failure and confessed his helplessness, begging the Lord to take over where he had failed. And at that point—but not a moment before—God did take over (Ether 2:22–3:6). Even the mighty brother of Jared had to learn by that mortifying but highly effective process of trial and error, which is the essence of our time of probation here on earth.

We should not let the element of the fantastic in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers prejudice us too much against them. The history of Egyptology is largely a story of the fantastic. Aside from the nature of the material, every Egyptologist must indulge in some pretty wild guessing from time to time if he hopes for any fruitful breakthroughs—the greater the scholar the more bold and original the guessing. The bad guesses, of course, don’t get published; usually they are quietly and mercifully forgotten and never held against their perpetrators. We are not much interested in the thousands of times that Edison was wrong, but in the hundreds of times he was right. In the case of Joseph Smith the attitude of the critics has always been the reverse of this. But no man knew better than he that it is by our mistakes that we are admonished, humbled, and enlightened.

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers, we submit, represent that mandatory preliminary period of investigation and exploration during which men are required to “study it out in [their] mind” (D&C 9:8), making every effort to “obtain for themselves” whatever can be so obtained, thereby discovering and acknowledging their own limitations before asking for direct revelation from on high. There were at least three separate experiments or approaches, none of which, as far as we can see at present, contributed anything to the Book of Abraham. Specifically, (1) the Book of Abraham was not derived from the alphabet writings, which only got as far as beta—the second letter; (2) it was not derived from or by means of the grammar, which never got beyond the first page and a half; (3) it was not translated from the first two
lines of the Joseph Smith Papyrus XI—the Book of Breathings, for reasons indicated above. These three projects were separate undertakings, each dealing with different materials from the others and in a different way. The three exercises can be regarded as experiments which were dropped before any of them got very far—laid aside and wisely kept out of circulation, for such things could easily be misinterpreted by malicious minds.

Many ask from what particular Egyptian manuscript the Book of Abraham was translated. The answer is that we do not know. The eleven fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri in our possession are only a portion of the original collection. But when in 1842 the Prophet at Nauvoo describes himself as “translating from the Records of Abraham,” we can be sure that it was not the Book of Breathings to which he was referring, that having been dropped for good way back in 1837.

All proper investigation moves from the known to the unknown, and whatever was definitely known the brethren of Kirtland were willing to embrace—they made valiant efforts to come to grips with Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and German; but in their day nothing was known about Egyptian. What were they to do? They had nothing to go on but intuition, and they gave it a try. They had an excellent excuse for not getting involved in the mysteries of an unknown language, but still they tried their hand at a number of approaches, because you never know and because they had been invited by revelation to do so. God knew perfectly well that the brother of Jared would fall on his face; that was part of the plan. But we today are in a different situation; we have enormous advantages which the men of Kirtland did not have, and the firm and relentless thrusting in our faces of the newly rediscovered Joseph Smith Papyri is a reminder that we now are under the same obligation they were under to exhaust all the available resources. Those resources are indeed formidable and should test the skill and dedication
of LDS scholars to the limit. So far, though they have hardly been touched, they promise wonderful things.

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers were a milestone, now left far behind. The follies of 1912 were another, in which Joseph Smith’s critics showed their limitations to the world. There will be other milestones, but the lesson of each will be the same—namely, that the more diligently we seek, the better right we have to ask.

What emerges most clearly from a closer look at the Kirtland Egyptian Papers is the fact that there is nothing official or final about them—they are fluid, exploratory, confidential, and hence free of any possibility or intention of fraud or deception. Strangely enough, though they seem to express a free play of fancy, they are not all pure nonsense. For example, Joseph Smith’s discussion of the alphabet, strangely reminiscent of Rabbi Akiba’s alphabet, reads like a very up-to-date analysis of the basic ideas of Egyptian religion and kingship; and there are so many happy guesses about the meanings of symbols that one begins to wonder whether they can all be purely accidental or fanciful. After all, the Book of Abraham itself is far from nonsense. All these things, however, must be the subject of other and more careful studies.