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Prophets, Pagans, and Papyri

The Jews of Greco-Roman Egypt and the Transmission of the Book of Abraham

Stephen O. Smoot and Kerry Muhlestein

Egypt has a long history of exchange and contact with a variety of people. Ancient people of diverse ethnic backgrounds made their way into Egypt—whether as war captives, mercenaries, merchants, invading armies, members of diplomatic parties, refugees, or simple migrants—bringing with them their language and culture. One such group was the ancient Jews, whose enslavement at the hands of “a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” (Ex. 1:8), and exodus under the prophetic leadership of Moses may be the best-remembered incident of a Hebrew presence in Egypt, but it was not the only one.

During the reign of the Ptolemaic (Greek) pharaohs (c. 300–30 BC) and well into Roman dominion (c. 30 BC–AD 350), there was an unmistakable Jewish presence throughout Egypt, evidence of which can be found in the surviving archaeological and historical record. These Egyptian Jews established communities in several locations and became a cultural force that, while perhaps not as influential on the Egyptian social landscape as the Greeks and Romans, was nevertheless substantial. Thanks to the “relatively abundant discursive evidence, the Judeans of Hellenistic Egypt” have been described as being “one of the best known of . . . the many minority immigrant populations long-settled in Egypt” by the time of the Greco-Roman Era.¹ These Jews or Judean immigrants

brought their religious customs and texts with them into Egypt or, in some cases, composed new religious texts altogether and participated in the wider multicultural discourse of the time that shaped their ethnic (including religious) identity.2 “Egypt was a cosmopolitan country” during this period, after all, a period that was “an age of religious synthesis.”3

The cultural setting of Greco-Roman Egypt may be interesting to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its own right, but knowing more about it may help them better understand a possible transmission method for one of their scriptural texts. The Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price purports to be “a translation of . . . the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt.”4 The story (and controversy) surrounding the Book of Abraham and the associated Egyptian papyri once owned by Joseph Smith is complex and multifaceted.5 Complications and questions abound regarding the historicity of the Book of Abraham, its relationship to the papyri owned by Joseph Smith, the way it was translated, and the Prophet’s interpretation of the three facsimiles that accompany the text. Given the gaps in the historical record (to say nothing of the diverse methodological assumptions that have undergirded different approaches to the text), this subject will give scholars plenty of fodder for continued academic investigation.6

One question that remains open for examination is how a purported autobiography of the patriarch Abraham could have been transmitted from his time (most likely circa 2,000–1,800 BC) into the Ptolemaic period (when the Joseph Smith Papyri were created)—a journey of well

over a millennium and a half! How feasible or likely is it that a copy of Abraham's writings could have been recovered from a point in history so far removed from his own time? How was the text transmitted, and when? And by whom? And for what purpose(s)? And how likely is it that Abraham's writings would have been associated with a collection of funerary papyri seemingly unrelated to anything Jewish or biblical?

These are all valid and important questions that have been addressed in part before. To answer the question of how a putative copy of Abraham's writings could have been transmitted into Greco-Roman Egypt (and subsequently into the possession of Joseph Smith), this paper will first look at the evidence that demonstrates a Jewish presence in Greco-Roman Egypt. After reviewing this evidence, it will then explore questions related to the direction of cultural exchange between Egyptian and Jewish groups. Did Jewish migrants coming into Egypt absorb Egyptian culture more than they imported and disseminated their own culture and customs? Did the Egyptians ever borrow or adapt Jewish ideas and figures? Was there an even flow of cultural exchange in both directions? What kinds of exchange are detectable in the surviving evidence? Finally, this paper will explore how all of this may shed light on a plausible way in which the Book of Abraham could have been transmitted down to the Hellenistic era.

In the spirit of candor, we acknowledge that this outline for a plausible transmission of the Book of Abraham rests on the assumption that Joseph Smith had in his possession a physical ancient copy of Abraham's writings. If one assumes that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham in a way comparable to his translation of the parchment of John (D&C 7)—that is, as revealed text that did not exist among the Egyptian

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papyri he possessed or a physical copy of which he otherwise did not have tangible access to—then much of what is discussed in this paper will likely lose most of its significance. After all, some prefer to see the translation of the Book of Abraham as purely revelatory and disassociated from any actual papyri in Joseph Smith’s possession. This position is understandable, has some merit, and should be carefully considered. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself allows for just such a scenario in its Gospel Topics essay on this subject:

Joseph’s study of the papyri may have led to a revelation about key events and teachings in the life of Abraham, much as he had earlier received a revelation about the life of Moses while studying the Bible. This view assumes a broader definition of the words *translator* and *translation*. According to this view, Joseph’s translation was not a literal rendering of the papyri as a conventional translation would be. Rather, the physical artifacts provided an occasion for meditation, reflection, and revelation. They catalyzed a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation about the life of Abraham, even if that revelation did not directly correlate to the characters on the papyri.

Additionally, there are those who have speculated that the Book of Abraham might be a pseudepigraphic text composed by a Jewish author during the Greco-Roman period. Much of what is laid out in this paper may be highly relevant to this line of thinking. But these additional issues are too broad to explore in this treatment. Suffice it to say for now that despite the important advances scholars have made in recent years,


no one single theory for the origin of the Book of Abraham can account for all of the evidence (a point that has also been stressed before).  

We also wish to make clear what is and is not at stake with the argument we will make in this paper. The only thing at stake in this paper is our theory of a probable way a copy of Abraham’s record ended up in Ptolemaic Thebes. Further, we wish to emphasize that our putting forward this theory does not mean that we strongly favor the theory that the text of the Book of Abraham was on the papyrus over the theory that the papyri served as a catalyst to Joseph Smith’s reception of a revelation of an inspired scriptural text. We are merely exploring ways that the text of the Book of Abraham could have been transmitted if that text was actually on the papyrus Joseph Smith owned. As we acknowledge above, if faithful and sincere Latter-day Saints favor the “catalyst theory” for the origins of the Book of Abraham, they are free to reject our argument in this paper without in any way diminishing the text’s scriptural status. The inherent authenticity and inspiration of the Book of Abraham is not what is at stake in this paper. Latter-day Saints may of course accept both the text’s authenticity and inspiration without subscribing to our theory about its possible ancient transmission.

With that said, because the notion that the Book of Abraham was translated from papyri in Joseph Smith’s possession is a widely held theory, it is worth exploring how such a theoretical text could have ended up among the Joseph Smith Papyri. Therefore, for the purposes of this exploration, we shall proceed under the assumption that Joseph Smith possessed a copy of Abraham’s writings as we explore this noteworthy data.

Prelude to the Ptolemies:  
The Early Waves of Jewish Migration into Egypt

Before discussing the evidence for the presence of Jews in Egypt during the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri (that is, the Ptolemaic Period), we provide a few words on the historical events leading up to this time in order to provide some context. The Hebrew Bible reports that from time to time, small parties of ancient Israelites—such as the future king of the northern Kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam—came to Egypt for refuge (1 Kgs. 11:40). Such isolated instances, however, cannot, on their own, account for a substantial Jewish presence in Egypt; nor do they seem to be the

most likely route of transmission for the Book of Abraham. The earliest sizeable Jewish migration into Egypt, probably one of soldiers and refugees, seems to have occurred as early as the seventh century BC, although we do not know much about their actual move to Egypt.\textsuperscript{15} Archaeological evidence from this time (in the form of wine decanters that were likely used in Sabbath rituals) suggests that these early migrants into the Nile delta retained a sense of Jewish religious identity and community.\textsuperscript{16}

The next large relocation of Jews into Egypt, which we can identify more precisely, was just after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, when Johanan, the son of Kareah, and the remaining captains of Judah's forces led many of the Jews who had survived Babylon's assault in a mass migration into Egypt (Jer. 43). “The Neo-Babylonian empire's conquests during the early sixth century BCE certainly encouraged emigration from the Kingdom of Judah.”\textsuperscript{17} This group included the prophet Jeremiah and his scribe, Baruch, along with earlier refugees or migrants, and it may have formed the seed-core of what would become a well-established colony of Jews.

While we do not have much more specific information about other waves of Jewish migration at the time of the Babylonian exile (circa 597–537 BC), it is clear that they took place and that there was continued resettling of Jews in Egypt.\textsuperscript{18} Shortly afterward, during the Persian Period (circa 550–330 BC), one settlement—a garrison of Jewish mercenaries—grew into a significant colony on the island of Elephantine in Upper Egypt. Significantly, this colony boasted a temple dedicated to Yaho (Yahweh),\textsuperscript{19} complete with its own priesthood, and was adjacent


\textsuperscript{17} Sänger, “Jewish Military Colony in Leontopolis,” 173.


to an Egyptian temple dedicated to the ram-headed deity Khnum.\(^{20}\) This Jewish temple was so important and occupied such a prominent place in the religious identity and practices of the Jewish inhabitants on the island that one scholar has gone so far as to call the Jews of Elephantine “a temple community.”\(^{21}\) Unfortunately, growing political and civil unrest would eventually lead to the temple’s destruction in 410 BC at the hands of Egyptian vandals.\(^{22}\)

The introduction of Jewish and Aramean foreigners into Egypt resulted, naturally, in a linguistic and cultural exchange that would continue well into the Ptolemaic Period (circa 300–30 BC).\(^{23}\) This included a

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\(^{21}\) Van der Toorn, \textit{Becoming Diaspora Jews}, 95–100.


religious exchange that saw, for instance, the adoption of Egyptian burial liturgy and afterlife imagery in Aramaic funerary inscriptions (Aramaic being the language of postexilic Jews). Evidence for such includes several Egyptian sarcophagi recovered from Saqqara in Lower Egypt and Aswan in Upper Egypt (near Elephantine) and no less than five grave stelae written in Aramaic. This evidence “shows an adoption of Egyptian burial practices and religious beliefs” on the part of Aramaic-speaking persons who lived and died in Egypt. “Aramaic speakers participated in the Egyptian afterlife according to Egyptian practices, described in Egyptian terms. The material also shows a connection between the Aramaic-speaking communities at Elephantine and Saqqara.”

But Elephantine was not the only Jewish community in Persian Egypt. Fleeing violence or seeking economic and social stability, communities of Jews and other Semites (especially Arameans and Syrians) sprang up in multiple locations throughout Egypt. The Hebrew Bible, for instance, refers to “Judeans living in the land of Egypt, at Migdol, at Tahpanhes, at Memphis, and in the land of Pathros” during the time of the prophet Jeremiah (NRSV Jer. 44:1). When Alexander conquered the country in 332 BC, “a fresh wave of Jewish immigrants” into Egypt resulted. Surviving evidence confirms this portrait of a multiethnic Egypt during the Persian and early Ptolemaic periods. From it, we can clearly see that there was a significant Jewish population in Egypt from as early as the time of the Babylonian exile. These early migrations set the stage for the emergence of the Jewish community in Egypt during the Greco-Roman Period.

Jewish Communities in Greco-Roman Egypt

The ancient city of Alexandria claims the honor of being the best-documented location of a sizable Jewish community in Greco-Roman

Egypt. Abundant evidence has survived that attests to the presence of Alexandrian Jews well into the Roman period as well. The literature exploring the history and significance of the Jewish community at Alexandria is immense, well beyond the scope of this paper to address in full. Representative treatments can be found elsewhere.²⁹ What can be said here, in short, is that the Jews in Alexandria established a thriving community that included synagogues, homes, public buildings, and cemeteries.³⁰

Besides the erection of Jewish religious and civic structures, Alexandria also saw the proliferation of an influential Jewish intellectual movement perhaps best typified by the Hellenistic-Jewish writer Philo Judaeus (Philo of Alexandria). Writing in the early first century AD, Philo's voluminous works covered primarily theological and philosophical topics, including extensive commentaries on the Hebrew Bible.³¹ The Greek-speaking Alexandrian savant also touched on matters regarding the life and culture of his Jewish contemporaries and indeed significantly influenced the evolution of Hellenistic Jewish identity.³² "Philo is significant for the understanding of first century A.D. Hellenistic


Judaism. He is the main surviving literary figure of the Hellenized Judaism of the Second Temple period of ancient Judaism.\textsuperscript{33}

In the southeastern portion of the Nile Delta, the ancient city of Leontopolis (modern Tell el-Yahudiya) in the Heliopolitan Nome reportedly housed a Jewish colony complete with a temple modeled after the Jerusalem temple. From the Jewish historian Josephus, we learn that during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor in the second century BC, the Jewish priest Onias had replicated the Jerusalem temple at Leontopolis to serve the religious needs of his community.\textsuperscript{34} Onias’s letter purports that his sanctuary was refashioned out of the remains of a dilapidated Egyptian temple “after the pattern of that in Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{35}

Although Josephus may have garbled (or embellished) some of the details,\textsuperscript{36} other evidence confirms the existence of Onias and his band of exiles, who had fled Egypt to escape the maneuverings of the Jerusalem priesthood.\textsuperscript{37} “Onias’ Temple was no run-of-the-mill backwater sanctuary solely catering to the religious needs of Onias’ community. On the contrary, at its pinnacle Onias’ Temple was a major religious and cultural center of Egyptian Judaism.”\textsuperscript{38} In addition to textual information about the temple, a significant Jewish presence in the area is attested by a large cemetery which contains a great number of names that are distinctly Jewish.\textsuperscript{39} “Already towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, archaeologists discovered a fairly large (Jewish) cemetery containing funerary epitaphs largely dating to the early Roman period. While one epitaph mentions the ‘Land of Onias,’ another attests to the presence of priests at the site.” Not unlike the earlier community at


\textsuperscript{35} Josephus, \textit{Antiquities} 13.3.67.


\textsuperscript{38} Piotrkowski, \textit{Priests in Exile}, 3.

Elephantine, “the latter attestation implies that the local community [at Leontopolis] was centered on a temple.”

A group of Greek papyri from the Roman period attests to another Jewish community in the Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus. Evidently these Jews were well organized politically and enjoyed official legal recognition by Roman authorities. Jews continued to live at Oxyrhynchus even after the city became dominated by Christians, although from the Christian period onward it becomes much more difficult to disentangle Jewish and Christian identities in the site’s surviving textual record.

Finally, there is evidence for a significant Jewish presence in the Fayum during the Greco-Roman period. The surviving corroboration for such is predominantly textual or inscriptive. “The nature of our evidence handicaps constructing an accurate picture of the Jewish presence in the Fayum. Lacking material culture in known archaeological remains that indicates Jewish individuals, and not having discovered a clearly Jewish cemetery, we are forced to rely on textual evidence which only incidentally bears on the subject.” The evidence from the Fayum includes a robust Jewish onomasticon, but epigraphic sources also attest to synagogues at Krokodilopolis and elsewhere. Moreover, a recently discovered but as of yet unpublished papyrus fragment from the Fayum dating to the third century BC affords new attestation to the heretofore unknown ethnic-legal designation “Judeo-Egyptian” (Ioudaioaigyptios). The important conclusion we can draw from this

42. Kasher, Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, 156–57.
47. Lincoln H. Blumell and Kerry Hull, “A Ptolemaic Petition of a ‘Judeo-Egyptian’ (Ioudaioaigyptios)?” (presented at the 2021 SBL/AAR annual conference in San Antonio, Texas). Our thanks to Blumell and Hull for alerting us to this new evidence, which is forthcoming in print.
evidence is that the Jewish population in Egypt grew dramatically during the Hellenistic and Roman eras. During the Ptolemaic period, there were indeed many large Jewish population centers throughout many parts of Egypt.

**Onomastic Evidence for Jews in Greco-Roman Egypt**

If we zoom in from a wider perspective on the major Jewish settlements in Greco-Roman Egypt to a specific look at some of the cultural artifacts that these communities left behind, we see how the members of these communities constituted a well-known and influential part of the ancient cultural landscape. Consider, for example, the identification of Jewish names in burial inscriptions, contracts, dedications, and letters, as well as textual sources in Aramaic, Greek, and Demotic Egyptian identifying Jews with specific ethnonyms. 48 The onomastic evidence (or evidence that derives from names as attested in ancient written sources) for a widespread Jewish presence in Greco-Roman Egypt is compelling enough that one scholar concluded that during this time, “besides the Greeks, Jews were the most numerous group of foreigners living in Egypt.” 49

Besides Winnicki’s own illuminating study, 50 two other works, by William Horbury and David Noy and by Silvie Honigman, have demonstrated this. 51 Honigman says that “Jewish names are an important source of evidence about Jewish life in Graeco-Roman Egypt and elsewhere in the Jewish diaspora.” 52 However, this evidence is not without its own limitations. For one thing, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the bearer of a Jewish name, unless specified with an ethnonym, was in fact Jewish. Likewise, there are known Jews (identified as such in the textual sources) who bore Greek and even Egyptian names. 53 The safest assumption in most cases is that a bearer of a Jewish name was in

48. Winnicki, *Late Egypt and Her Neighbors*, 181–82.
49. Winnicki, *Late Egypt and Her Neighbors*, 182.
fact Jewish, but this is sometimes difficult to be sure of.\textsuperscript{54} Further, there were undoubtedly Jews that did not bear Jewish names, making it inevitable that our estimations of Jewish populations are underestimations.

From the Persian period into the Roman period, Jewish persons have been identified in ancient sources as residing at numerous locations. This has been done particularly, but not exclusively, using onomastic evidence. Such locations include the following:

- In Lower Egypt: Alexandria, Schedia, Xenephyris, Nitriai, Tanis, Pelusium, Athribis, Leontopolis, Demerdash, Berenike, and Memphis
- In the Fayum: Krokodilopolis, Syron Kome, Alexandrou Nesos, Samaria, Chanaanain, Trikomia, Tebtynis, Herakleopolis, and Tebtnoi
- In Middle–Upper Egypt: Oxyrhynchos, Hermopolis Magna, Thebes, Edfu, and Elephantine.\textsuperscript{55}

Of these, areas in Herakleopolis and Berenike (the Mediterranean Berenike, not to be confused with the Red Sea Berenike) were designated as Jewish \textit{politeuma}, indicating that they were known and officially recognized Jewish havens.\textsuperscript{56} It is likely that other cities had similarly designated areas, but these are all we have extant textual evidence for.\textsuperscript{57} Krokodilopolis had a large enough Jewish community to support two synagogues, one of which was built by a large group of Jews who moved there from Thebes sometime in the early Roman era. Such structures

\textsuperscript{54} The situation becomes especially troublesome when looking at Jewish names in sources from Christian Egypt, because Christians frequently adopted biblical or Hebrew names. See Blumell, \textit{Lettered Christians}, 27–88, 247–48. The problem of discerning Jewish identity in the broader ethnic landscape of the Hellenistic world has been explored in Shaye J. D. Cohen, “‘Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not’: How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?,” in \textit{Diasporas in Antiquity}, 1–46. Scholars have elucidated methodologies that helpfully address many of these concerns and bolster confidence in seeing Jewish names as coming from actual Jewish persons in most instances, as opposed to being adopted by non-Jews. See Honigman, “Abraham in Egypt,” 280–82; Gideon Bohak, “Good Jews, Bad Jews, and Non-Jews in Greek Papyri and Inscriptions,” \textit{Archiv für Papyrusforschung: Beiheft} 3 (1997): 105–12; Moore, \textit{Jewish Ethnic Identity}, 71–76.

\textsuperscript{55} Winnicki, \textit{Late Egypt and Her Neighbors}, 240–49; Nathalie LaCoste, \textit{Waters of the Exodus: Jewish Experiences with Water in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt} (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 25–64.

\textsuperscript{56} Sänger, “Jewish Military Colony in Leontopolis,” 182–84.

\textsuperscript{57} For example, Sänger, “Jewish Military Colony in Leontopolis,” 189–94, argues that Leontopolis would have enjoyed this status as well.
also indicate a significant Jewish population in that city.\(^{58}\) This particular group seems to have migrated from Elephantine to Thebes by 300 BC and subsequently to Krokodilopolis by the end of the first century AD,\(^ {59}\) making the zenith of Theban Jewry to be from about 200 BC to AD 50. Further, at least twenty-five towns in Egypt hosted at least one synagogue.\(^ {60}\) In short, Jewish names and political designations indicate that there were real concentrations of Jewish communities of varying density throughout the whole of Egypt. The onomastic evidence makes it clear that the Jewish community in Egypt was even more widespread and influential in the Ptolemaic period than we could tell by relying solely on other kinds of evidence. It is of particular interest to note that during the Ptolemaic period, there was a significant Jewish population in Thebes—Egypt’s most religiously significant city and the place of the origin of the Joseph Smith Papyri.

**Literary Evidence for Jews in Greco-Roman Egypt**

Surviving evidence for Jewish literary works having been composed in, imported into, or otherwise disseminated throughout Egypt is especially noteworthy when discussing a possible route of transmission for the Book of Abraham. These works are primarily religious narratives or theological treatises. As discussed, Philo of Alexandria serves as the preeminent example. Philo, however, was not alone in producing Jewish literary works in Egypt. Although there remains some controversy surrounding its origins—including if it is a Jewish or Christian work\(^ {61}\)—the story of Joseph and Asenath appears, according to the current consensus, to have been written by an anonymous Jewish author living in Egypt (likely in the Nile Delta region) sometime between the second century BC and the second century AD.\(^ {62}\) This narrative, an expansion of the

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biblical account of Joseph of Egypt (Gen. 37–46), describes how Joseph’s espoused Egyptian wife Asenath turned from Egyptian idolatry and was converted to worshipping the true God through the miraculous ministration of an angel.

One scholar suggests that the text can trace its origins “to Onias’ arrival at Heliopolis, the construction of his temple there, and the various reactions to this move” and was written in response to both Jewish and Egyptian objections to the community’s existence. Whether or not this text was overtly used in proselyting activities, it would have served a role in enticing both longtime practitioners and recent converts to Judaism to the virtues of observing Jewish religious and ethical statutes. Piotrkowski has bolstered this argument with his own study, which suggests that not only Joseph and Asenath but several other Jewish works were composed by the Oniad community. “Scribal activity was part and parcel of Onias’ community too, as showcased by the works Joseph & Asenath, the Third Book of the Sibylline Oracles, Pseudo-Hecataeus, 3 Maccabees, and probably other compositions as well. . . . It is likely that scribal activity was an integral part of Oniad Judaism, which gives furthermore testimony to the importance of the Oniad community and its temple as a cultural and religious center in the Egyptian Jewish Diaspora.”

Another important and popular Jewish work composed in Egypt in the first to second centuries AD is the Testament of Abraham. Written originally in Greek and widely copied and translated into Coptic, Arabic, Ethiopic, and later Slavonic and Romanian, the text narrates the near-death cosmic vision of the biblical patriarch that culminates with a judgment scene where the dead are tried by fire, records, and scales or balances. After Abraham sees God or a godlike personage on a blazing throne, the text describes the following:

Before him [the figure on the throne] stood a table like crystal, all of gold and byssus. On the table lay a book whose thickness was six cubits, while

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63. Bohak, Joseph and Asenath, 90.
its breadth was ten cubits. On its right and on its left stood two angels holding papyrus and ink and pen. In front of the table sat a light-bearing angel, holding a balance in his hand. [On] (his) left there sat a fiery angel, altogether merciless and relentless, holding a trumpet in his hand, which contained within it an all-consuming fire (for) testing the sinners. And the wondrous man who sat on the throne was the one who judged and sentenced the souls. The two angels on the right and on the left recorded. The one on the right recorded righteous deeds, while the one on the left (recorded) sins. And the one who was in front of the table, who was holding the balance, weighed the souls. (Test. of Abr. 12:7–14)68

As we will discuss further below, this depiction of the judgement of the dead being conducted by weighing the souls in a pair of scales while an attending angel records the outcome on papyrus is viewed by many as clear evidence of Egyptian influence on the theology of the text.69

The most significant Jewish literary work produced in Ptolemaic Egypt would have to be the Septuagint—the monumentally important ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the history of the translation and transmission of the Septuagint. For that, the reader is directed elsewhere.70 Still, we will touch on a few points here for the sake of the discussion in the next section of this paper.

The Septuagint project was accomplished in or around Alexandria in the third to second centuries BC. The earliest account of the translation appears in the famous (and largely questionable) Letter of Aristeas. The letter purports to be the work of one Aristeas, a member of the court of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, writing to his brother Philocrates. In it, Aristeas describes how an entourage of seventy-two Jewish scholars (hence the name Septuagint, “seventy”) from Jerusalem was welcomed to Alexandria to accomplish the work of translation. The project took seventy-two days and when completed was enthusiastically received by Alexandrian Jews.

Modern scholarship has cast much doubt on the historical veracity of the claims made in the letter. What can be gleaned from the letter, however, is the general cultural or intellectual milieu that produced the Septuagint, and perhaps some faint memories of earlier events. There can indeed be little doubt that a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures would have been necessary to accommodate the needs of Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt and elsewhere.

Jews throughout the Mediterranean region (Egypt, Syria-Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, and the Italian Peninsula) during the Greco-Roman period utilized the Septuagint in literary and religious works, most notably in the writings that would eventually be canonized as the Christian New Testament. Jewish authors in the first century AD such as Philo, Josephus, and Saul of Tarsus (the Apostle Paul) all utilized the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Bible in their own writings. Others, such as the Gentile-turned-Christian-turned-Jew Aquila of Sinope in the second century AD, later undertook new Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible that sought to improve the earlier translation accomplished in Egypt. Beyond the importance of the Septuagint for Greek-speaking Jews, the effort to render the Bible into Greek “had a considerable impact” on non-Jews, who now had “access to the sacred Hebrew texts. Alexandrian Judaism was clearly interested in spreading into ‘pagan’ milieu,”

73. Jobes and Silvia, Invitation to the Septuagint, 33–34.
and the translation of the Septuagint paved the way for religious syncretism between Jews and non-Jews. 77

In summary, the important conclusions arrived at thus far in the paper are as follows:

1. A significant population of Jews was in Egypt as early as the Babylonian exile.

2. This population continued to thrive under the Ptolemies.
   a. It burgeoned especially in Alexandria.
   b. It also spread throughout the country with some specific areas of high concentration.
   c. One of these high concentration areas was Thebes.

3. There was healthy intellectual development and literary output among Jews in Egypt during the Greco-Roman period.

Cultural Exchange between Jews and Egyptians during the Greco-Roman Period

It should be clear from the above that Persian and Greco-Roman Egypt saw the establishment of several Jewish communities and the proliferation of many Jewish literary productions. At this point it becomes necessary to ask to what extent members of these communities interacted with their Greek and Egyptian neighbors. Were the Jews of Greco-Roman Egypt isolationists, piously secluding and shielding themselves from the influences of their “pagan” environment? Or did they actively participate in their newfound environment and exchange ideas, customs, and material culture with their non-Jewish contemporaries? Furthermore, to what extent did Egyptians reciprocate this exchange?

It is clear that at least some Jews occupied a social status that enabled, or even encouraged, cross-cultural interaction. 78 They filled important political, civic, economic, police, and military positions. 79 Many Jews


78. Some of these ideas have been discussed elsewhere by one of the authors. See Muhlestein, “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael,” 246–58; Kerry Muhlestein, “The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture 22, no. 1 (2013): 20–33.

enjoyed the high social status of being a *Hellene*,\(^{80}\) or a Macedonian.\(^{81}\) A number of Jews became increasingly Egyptianized over time, indicating that they were interacting more and more with the larger Egyptian culture around them.\(^{82}\) Some even served in Greek temples,\(^{83}\) or in the royal administration.\(^{84}\) Some Jews remained somewhat separate culturally, while others fully participated in and often absorbed the surrounding culture.\(^{85}\) It is also clear that a number of influential rulers and employers developed a degree of familiarity with Jewish religion and customs.\(^{86}\)

Having established that intercultural influence was probable, this section will focus on just one aspect of ethnic interaction where the surviving evidence for exchange in both directions (Jewish to Egyptian, and Egyptian to Jewish) is rather clear: religious and mythological syncretism. In a word, there is discernable evidence in both Jewish and Egyptian religious works of this period for religious syncretism between Jews and Egyptians. As one might expect, there was little to stop the polytheistic Egyptians from freely adapting mythological elements from the religious system of incoming Jews. What is somewhat more surprising, however, is that many Egyptian and even Palestinian Jews evidently did not think it inappropriate to re-appropriate Egyptian elements into their own religious worldview.

Before jumping into this evidence, a quick word on the nature of Greco-Roman Egyptian “magic” is necessary. This is because on the Egyptian side of things the evidence for syncretism mainly comes from so-called “magical” sources. As one scholar has explained, Egyptian magic during the Greco-Roman period (while certainly not wholly unique for its time or otherwise unprecedented) appears to have arisen


\(^{83}\) For one example, see P. Gurob 22, 2/48–50, in J. Silbait Smyly, ed., *Greek Papyri from Gurob* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgid, and Co., 1921), 38; Muhlestein and Innes, “Synagogues and Cemeteries,” 56.

\(^{84}\) See for example the funerary plaque of Ptolemy, son of Epikydes, the chief of police, in Horbury and Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions*, 27, no. 27.

\(^{85}\) Muhlestein and Innes, “Synagogues and Cemeteries,” 57; Moore, *Jewish Ethnic Identity*.

in part as a way to “contact and manipulate supernatural agents in daily life” to ensure fortuitous outcomes in life’s vicissitudes. Magical practices in Greco-Roman Egypt appear to have been a very popular enterprise, and “unlike temple rites” they “were not tied to a particular place, but could be executed wherever the need arose.”

Because of this, and thanks to the cross-cultural exchange that brought Egypt in contact with Greek, Jewish, and Near Eastern traditions, a variety of supernatural forces and agents could be invoked in healing and apotropaic spells, curses, love charms, divinatory practices, and horoscopes to interpret dreams, to acquire control of nature, or to manipulate the outcome of politics, litigation, athletic contests, and business transactions. Taken as a whole, the popular magical practices of Greco-Roman Egypt “present a fascinating mixture of old and new practices, of temple-based facilities and portable methods, of local and international trends.”

With this in mind, we proceed to look at the Egyptian evidence. The clearest example of Egyptians appropriating Jewish or biblical religious figures comes from the so-called Greek Magical Papyri (also known as the Theban Magical Library or the Anastasi Priestly Collection) from Greco-Roman Thebes. This corpus ranges in date from the second century BC to the fifth century AD, was composed by the Theban priesthood, and is “essentially religious in nature” in that it does not “represent anything out of the norm for Egyptian religion and religious practice.”

A look at the biblical figures invoked in this corpus of papyri is staggering. The nondivine names that are called upon in these spells include Abimelech, Abraham, Adam, Ammon, Aziel, Beruchiyahu, Darda, David, Gomorrah, Isaac, Israel, Jacob, Jeremiah, Jerusalem, Judah, Lot, Lot’s wife, Michael, Moses, Solomon, and, curiously, Osiris-Michael. The divine

94. This last name is especially interesting as an example of exactly the kind of Egyptian-Jewish syncretism we wish to draw attention to in this paper. That a Jewish divine figure such as Michael was “invoked alongside [the Egyptian deity] Osiris” and perhaps even identified with the same in the “bilingual magical tradition” of Greco-Roman Egypt nicely punctuates our point about the significance this evidence might
names for Israel’s God are invoked as well, including Adonai, Adonai Sabaoth, Elohim, El, “God of the Hebrews,” and Yahweh with abbreviated forms. These biblical figures are utilized in ways that converge with known Egyptian magical practices. One spell calls upon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make the wearer of a ring famous, admired, and rich. Another—a love charm—invokes the name of Abraham in a list of magical words or names and promises to consign a female mummiform figure on a lion couch to the flames if she does not fall for the spell’s wielder. A Demotic spell for obtaining youth invokes Abraham, “the pupil of the sound eye,” in a long chain of magical words or agents meant to help in this regard. While scholars have debated how familiar the Egyptians using these spells were with the biblical material, it is clear that the Greek Magical Papyri (in addition to other Egyptian textual sources) provide evidence of “the Jewish contribution to the larger religious discourse in this period,” and that “Jewish divinity could be used in the broader Greco-Roman milieu in a variety of discourses, philosophical, religious and magical.”

But how might the Theban priesthood have gained a knowledge of these biblical figures? Honigman speculates that the dissemination of the influential Septuagint may have played a role in spreading knowledge of Jewish names and customs throughout Egypt. “After the Pentateuch was translated into Greek in Alexandria, apparently under Ptolemy II Philadelphus, it became an object of study for Jews, arguably not only in Alexandria but also in other Jewish settlements in Egypt.” Honigman

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100. Smith, God in Translation, 282.
notes. Shortly thereafter, “various literary works soon popularized biblical stories: Ezechiel’s tragedies, and the novel Joseph and Aseneth, etc. These ‘adaptations’ of the Pentateuch to Hellenistic taste certainly played an important role in popularizing biblical characters, arguably perhaps playing an even greater role than the demanding study of the Septuagint.” Given the evidence for a Jewish presence at Thebes beginning in the Persian period and into the Ptolemaic period, it is plausible that information about biblical or Jewish figures could have been transmitted by these colonists to the Theban priesthood, who then utilized said figures in innovative syncretic ways.

This brief summary should be enough to demonstrate syncretism among the ancient Egyptians during the Greco-Roman period. Now we will look briefly at a few examples of Jewish syncretism and utilization of Egyptian religious material. We begin with the Testament of Abraham, discussed above as having most likely been composed by a Jewish author living in Egypt in the first or second century AD. As mentioned, the judgment scene portrayed in the text almost certainly takes at least some of its inspiration from Egyptian religion, particularly the judgment scene from chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead. “The closest parallels to the post-mortem judgment as [the text] depicts it are in Egyptian sources,” notes Allison. “As one works through chaps. 12–13, again and again one comes back to Egyptian ideas and Egyptian texts.” Ludlow draws our attention not only to the obvious parallels with the Book of the Dead but also to the Demotic tale of Setne Khamwas (discussed further below), which also contains a postmortem judgment scene that parallels the Testament of Abraham and other Jewish texts. Not only was the author of the Testament of Abraham “very familiar with Egyptian judgment scenes,” Ludlow concludes, “but [was] actually playing with them as he had with biblical figures to weave a memorable tale.” This suggests more than accidental or passing similarities between the two traditions and indicates that the Jewish author of the Testament of Abraham actively and unabashedly incorporated Egyptian mythological elements into his own work.

Further evidence of Jews utilizing Egyptian literary and mythological material can be seen in the appropriation of elements of the Demotic tale of Setne Khamwas. This story is divided into two main parts and revolves around the life of Setne Khamwas, a son of Ramesses II and high priest of Ptah at Memphis. The second part of the story, preserved on a Roman-period Demotic papyrus (Papyrus British Museum 604), includes an account of Setne’s travels to the underworld. While there, Setne, in the company of his son, witnesses the judgment of the dead, including the ironic outcome of a rich and honored man in mortality being tortured for his sins and a poor beggar in mortality being exalted by Osiris’ side for his good deeds.

Si-Osire walked out in front of him and said: “My father Setne, did you not see that rich man clothed in a garment of royal linen, standing near the spot where Osiris is? He is the poor man whom you saw being carried to Memphis with no one walking behind him and wrapped in a mat. They brought him to the netherworld. They weighed his misdeeds against the good deeds he had done on earth. They found his good deeds more numerous than his misdeeds in relation to his lifespan, which Thoth had assigned him in writing, and in relation to his luck on earth. It was ordered by Osiris to give the burial equipment of that rich man, whom you saw being carried out from Memphis with great honors, to this poor man, and to place him among the noble spirits, as a man of god who serves Sokar-Osiris and stands near the spot where Osiris is.

“That rich man whom you saw: they took him to the netherworld. They weighed his misdeeds against his good deeds. They found his misdeeds more numerous than the good deeds he had done on earth. It was ordered to imprison him in the netherworld. He is [the man whom you saw] with the pivot of the door of the netherworld fixed in his right eye, so that it opens and shuts on his eye, and his mouth is open in great lamentation.”


107. Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature, 140–41.
Since the pioneering work of Hugo Greßmann, several scholars have noted the striking parallels between this scene and Jesus’s parable of Lazarus and the rich man as recorded in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 16:19–31) and have argued for a Jewish borrowing and adaptation of the Egyptian material. Lichtheim introduces Setne Khamwas by commenting on the “genuinely Egyptian motifs” of the nobleman who is tortured in the netherworld while the poor man is deified in the afterlife. These motifs, she insists, “formed the basis for the parable of Jesus in Luke 16:19–31, and for the related Jewish legends, preserved in many variants in Talmudic and medieval Jewish sources.” Grobel has further explored the parallels between the two traditions. He notes how Lazarus being exalted in “the bosom of Abraham” in Luke’s retelling of the parable is very likely a Jewish refashioning of the imagery in Setne Khamwas of the poor beggar being found exalted by the throne of Osiris. “Abraham’ must be a Jewish substitute for the pagan god Osiris,” Grobel concludes. “He is the very seat of divine authority” in the parable, “for he was originally the lord of Amnte, Osiris.” Even the name Lazarus itself, Grobel posits, is the Greek (Lazaros) version of the Hebrew-Aramaic “God-helped-(him)” (ʾel-ʿazar), which “points back toward an Egyptian original with similar meaning: ‘Osiris-helps-him’, for instance.”

This is not, apparently, the only instance of the biblical figure Abraham being syncretized with Osiris in the Greco-Roman period. As explained by Gee, a funerary formula found on several mummy labels, grave stelae, funerary texts, and temple graffiti was syncretized with biblical figures in its later versions in Greek and Coptic. The short Demotic version of the formula reads, “May his soul live in the presence of Osiris-Sokar the great god, the lord of Abydos.” In its re-appropriated and reinterpreted Judeo-Christian rendering in Greek, however, the formula reads, “Rest his soul in the bosom of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,” with an equivalent reading in Coptic. This would appear to strengthen the

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109. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 126; see also Ritner, “Adventures of Setna and Si-Osire (Setna II),” 471.


111. Grobel, “. . . Whose Name Was Neves,” 380.

112. Grobel, “. . . Whose Name Was Neves,” 381.

contention that the popular Jewish parable enshrined in Luke’s gospel drew inspiration from earlier Egyptian sources.

**The Book of Abraham in Greco-Roman Egypt**

From this we detect a clear trend—beginning in the Persian Period with Aramaic funerary inscriptions and continuing on into the Greco-Roman period with literary and religious syncretism—of cultural exchange and innovation between Egyptians and Jews. Not only did Jews live and thrive in Egypt during this time, but they actively participated in the broader cultural discourse that included exchanging ideas about God, the afterlife, and related theological topics. It is this historical background that may provide an illuminating context for the transmission of the Book of Abraham and provide a plausible scenario for how and why an Egyptian priest from Thebes may have obtained or created his own copy of Abraham’s writings.\(^{114}\)

To do this, we first need to review what we know about the ancient owners of the papyri that eventually came into the possession of Joseph Smith; specifically, the ancient owner of the text known as the Book of Breathings. These papyri, conventionally labeled Joseph Smith Papyri I+XI+X,\(^{115}\) constitute what the ancient Egyptians called the Document of Breathing Made by Isis for Her Brother Osiris (commonly called the Book of Breathings today).\(^{116}\) The copy of the Book of Breathings that was acquired by Joseph Smith anciently belonged to a man named Hor (or Horos in Greek) who was part of a priestly family from Ptolemaic Thebes.\(^{117}\) We know quite a bit about Hor and his occupation as a priest,

\(^{114}\) This is, once again, assuming that an ancient copy was in fact transmitted down to the Ptolemaic period.


including his genealogy and the various roles he served as a member of the Theban priesthood. From his titles as preserved in the first column of text in P. Joseph Smith I, for example, we know he was both a “priest [or prophet] of Amon-Re, king of the gods,” as well as a “priest [or prophet] of Min, who massacres his enemies.” In both of these capacities Hor participated in execration rituals wherein he symbolically slaughtered the enemies of Egypt, among other duties, and thus “had a professional interest” in what we might today call “human sacrifice” (or, more properly, ritual violence). He was also a priest or prophet

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120. Rhodes, Hor Book of Breathings, 21. The Egyptian term ḥm nṯr means literally “god’s servant.” It is typically (though not always) translated as “priest” by Egyptologists today but is attested as being rendered prophētēs (“prophet”) during the Greco-Roman Period. Both words capture an aspect of what it meant anciently to be a ḥm nṯr, and so we have opted to use the more common Egyptological nomenclature while also alerting our readers to this added nuance. See the discussion in John Gee, “Prophets, Initiation and the Egyptian Temple,” Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities 31 (2004): 97–107; Gee, Introduction to the Book of Abraham, 58; compare Coenen, “Horos, Prophet of Min.”


of the deity “Khonsu, who is powerful in Thebes” (or Chespisichis in Greek). In this capacity Hor was “closely connected with the cult of Khonsu at Karnak” and attended to a god who was something of, among other things, a savior deity with miraculous powers of deliverance over evil and death.

To summarize, the Egyptian priest Hor lived in Thebes when there was a substantial Jewish population and an environment of transethnic cultural sharing. As a priest living in one of the major cult centers of ancient Egypt during the high point of Jewish presence and influence in Thebes, Hor would have enjoyed a cosmopolitan lifestyle and indeed “would have been highly educated, literate, and likely conversant in several languages; he also would have had access to the great libraries of the temples in Thebes.” The corpus of magical papyri from Thebes discussed above confirms that the city was a hotbed for religious syncretism and exchange during the Greco-Roman period, a point that is highly significant for our present theory about the transmission of the Book of Abraham. Hor was specifically interested in things having to do with ritual violence. He also served in functions that would have sparked an interest in creation, divine protection, and deliverance.

In short, Hor was in an occupation that may have made him interested in the very things the Book of Abraham speaks about and that may have put him in a position to encounter biblical and extrabiblical Jewish writings. What we know about Hor’s specific religious interests (the temple, ritual violence, and the veneration of a savior deity) indicates that a text like the Book of Abraham could very well have attracted his attention. With the evidence arrayed above for the presence of Jews throughout Egypt who were composing and transmitting their religious texts and traditions into the country and participating in


multiethnic exchange, we can posit a highly plausible route of transmis-
sion for a copy of the Book of Abraham into ancient Thebes that could
have reached him. To be clear, this does not prove that Hor had a copy of
the Book of Abraham in his possession. It does, however, reinforce the
point that “if any ancient Egyptians were in a position to know about
Abraham” or have access to a text like the Book of Abraham, “it was the
Theban priests,” including Hor, the owner of P. Joseph Smith I+XI+X.127

Conclusion

More could be said about many of the issues raised in this paper. For
instance, it remains to be more fully explored how early Christianity’s
first wave of converts (both Jewish and non-Jewish) from Egypt syncre-
tized native Egyptian elements with their new faith of Christ.128 For now
the following summary will suffice:

1. Archaeological and textual evidence conclusively demonstrates
that ancient Jews migrated into Egypt beginning as early as the
eighth century BC.

2. In addition to founding new communities complete with civic
and religious structures (including temples), these Jews not only
brought with them their religious texts (including the writings of
the Hebrew Bible) but also composed and disseminated new liter-
ary works while residing in Egypt. While scholars continue to
refine our understanding of the cultural identity of “diaspora” Jews
during the Hellenistic Period, it is clear that Egyptian Jews con-
tributed to their new home and culture.129 This evidence provides
a plausible route of transmission for a copy of Abraham’s writings
into Egypt.

3. Many Egyptianized or Hellenized Jews of the Greco-Roman period
maintained their religious heritage and identity while also not

128. See Annette Evans, “Ancient Egyptian Elements in Hebrews 1?,” in Septuagint
and Reception: Essays Prepared for the Association for the Study of the Septuagint in
Aspects of Egypt’s Conversion to Christianity,” in Coptic Culture: Past, Present and Future,
ed. Mariam Ayad (Stevenage, United Kingdom: The Coptic Orthodox Church Centre,
2012), 43–55; David Frankfurter, Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in
129. Joseph M. Modrzejewski, “How to Be a Jew in Hellenistic Egypt?,” in Diasporas
in Antiquity, 65–92.
hesitating to freely syncretize Greek and Egyptian elements with their own religious traditions and texts. “For at least four centuries, from the beginning of the third century BCE to the beginning of the second century CE, the [Jewish] Diaspora in Egypt . . . succeeded in creating a new current within Judaism and in establishing a dialogue with ‘pagan’ culture.”

4. On the other side of the equation, the polytheistic Egyptians, for whom “the very concept of a false god was alien,” likewise imported Greek and Jewish religious elements into their own religious structures. They willingly incorporated Jewish religious figures including Moses and Abraham into their magical practices and participated in the broader cultural exchange that occurred at the time.

5. What we know about Hor, the ancient owner of P. Joseph Smith I+XI+X (the Book of Breathings), and his occupation as a priest at Thebes (a city that saw cross-cultural exchange during the Greco-Roman period) could very plausibly account for why he might have been interested in a copy of a text like the Book of Abraham.

6. The Book of Abraham itself would have been right at home in the literary and religious milieu of Greco-Roman Egypt. Its narrative about the near-sacrifice and deliverance of Abraham, its temple and priesthood themes, its grand cosmology and Creation narrative, and its depiction of Abraham as teaching astronomy to the Egyptians all find striking parallels in Hellenistic Jewish, pagan, and later Christian and Islamic works. The affinity with this

130. Dunand and Zivie-Coche, Gods and Men in Egypt, 259.
extracanonical corpus provides a plausible ancient *Sitz im Leben* or social setting for the text in the time period of the creation of the Joseph Smith Papyri.\(^{133}\)

Taken together, the evidence above provides a plausible scenario for how a copy of a text “purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt,”\(^{134}\) could have been transmitted into Greco-Roman Egypt by a group of Jewish émigrés and eventually coming into the possession of an Egyptian priest. Many more questions remain to be explored with the tools of critical scholarship when it comes to the origin and nature of the text. When it comes to explaining *how* an ancient copy of the Book of Abraham could have been transmitted into Egypt, we can, with a fair amount of confidence, position ourselves atop this evidence as a solid starting place to launch future investigations.

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\(^{134}\) “Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704.