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## The “Kirtland Egyptian Papers” and the Book of Abraham

Associated with the translation of the Book of Abraham is a collection of documents commonly known today as the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers.”<sup>1</sup> This name was coined by Hugh Nibley in the early 1970s to describe a corpus of manuscripts that can be classified into, broadly, two categories: Book of Abraham manuscripts and Egyptian-language manuscripts (or manuscripts that “focus on alphabet and grammar material that the authors connected to the ancient Egyptian language”).<sup>2</sup> Because some of these documents postdate the Kirtland period of Latter-day Saint history, and because the name coined by Nibley to describe this corpus is somewhat vague, the name has fallen out of general use among scholars, who prefer more precise classifications. Regardless of what people today call them, “the[se] name designations are modern ones and typically reflect assumptions of the individuals using the particular designations. No [single] designation [to describe these texts] has gained wide acceptance.”<sup>3</sup>

The Book of Abraham manuscripts among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers contain multiple copies of the extant English text of the Book of Abraham. These manuscripts date from mid-1835 to early 1842 and are in

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1. Hugh Nibley, “The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” *BYU Studies* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1971): 350–99, reprinted in Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, ed. John Gee, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 18 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009), 502–68.

2. Brian M. Hauglid, “The Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project: ‘A Knowledge of Hidden Languages,’” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 474–79, quote at 477.

3. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 32–33.

the handwriting of W. W. Phelps, Warren Parrish, Frederick G. Williams, and Willard Richards.<sup>4</sup> The Egyptian-language manuscripts comprise an assortment of documents, some of which contain transcriptions of portions of the characters from the Egyptian papyri and associate them with English words and phrases, including passages from the Book of Abraham. These documents are in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Frederick G. Williams, and Warren Parrish.<sup>5</sup> While these two groups can be broadly distinguished, “it should also be understood that the Abraham documents contain a certain amount of Egyptian material and the Egyptian papers include a certain amount of Abraham material.”<sup>6</sup> Because of this, it is clear that there is some kind of relationship between these two groups, though the nature of that relationship is not entirely clear.

Because of conflicting interpretations of the historical data among scholars, the meaning, purpose, and significance of these documents is disputed. Even some basic details about this corpus remain disputed. This includes “their authorship, their date, their purpose, their relationship with the Book of Abraham, their relationship with the Joseph Smith Papyri, their relationship with each other, what the documents are or were intended to be, and even whether the documents form a discrete or coherent group.”<sup>7</sup> This uncertainty has unfortunately resulted in a lack of consensus on how to understand this collection.

The Egyptian-language documents among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers can be plausibly viewed as a sincere but misguided attempt by those involved to understand the Egyptian language in conjunction with the divinely revealed translation of the Book of Abraham. As with other “efforts of the time to unravel the mysteries of the Egyptian language, these attempts are considered by modern Egyptologists—both Latter-day Saints and others—to be of no actual value in understanding [the] Egyptian” language.<sup>8</sup> Because of this, some have attempted to use the Egyptian-language documents to cast doubt on Joseph Smith’s

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4. Hauglid, “Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project,” 477–78; Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 34–35.

5. Hauglid, “Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project,” 478; Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 34–35. The Book of Abraham manuscripts and related Egyptian-language documents can be viewed online at the Joseph Smith Papers website at <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr6>.

6. Hauglid, “Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project,” 477.

7. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 33.

8. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018), xxv.

prophetic inspiration or the authenticity of the Book of Abraham. These efforts, however, are highly questionable for a number of reasons and generally demonstrate an exercise in religious polemics rather than critical scholarship.

First, the simple fact is that “the extent of Joseph Smith’s involvement in the creation of these manuscripts is unknown.”<sup>9</sup> It is true that he had some involvement in the project since his handwriting appears in one manuscript, and his signature on another.<sup>10</sup> His manuscript history also contains a reference to his involvement with the project: “The remainder of this month [July 1835], I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arrangeing [*sic*] a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients.”<sup>11</sup> However, this is insufficient reason to conclude that Joseph Smith was the *primary* agent behind the effort to create the Egyptian-language documents.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xv.

10. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xv; Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 34.

11. “History, 1838–1856, Volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838],” 597, Joseph Smith Papers, February 2, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/51>.

12. For one thing, although this entry in Joseph Smith’s manuscript history is dated to July 1835 and written as though it comes directly from the Prophet, this comment is, in fact, a retrospective entry that was composed and inserted into the history by clerk Willard Richards no earlier than September 1843. Indeed, it could be that the entry comes not from Joseph Smith at all, but rather from his ghostwriter W. W. Phelps (compare Samuel Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 [2008]: 26–62), in whose hand the “Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language” (GAEL) volume is composed (see “Grammar and Alphabet of the English Language, circa July–circa November 1835,” Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/grammar-and-alphabet-of-the-egyptian-language-circa-july-circa-november-1835/7>). It must also not be forgotten that “although various people acted as scribe to Joseph Smith, they were independent people and had their own independent thoughts. Not everything written by one of Joseph Smith’s scribes came from the mind of Joseph Smith, even during the time period when they served as Joseph Smith’s scribes.” John Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 437. A cryptic note in Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo-era journal further complicates matters. An entry dated November 15, 1843, reads, “P.M. at the office. Suggested the Idea of preparing a grammar of the Egyptian Language.” Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 130. What could this mean? Possibilities include, but are not limited to, either that the Prophet wanted to do further work on the GAEL, assuming he participated in its production, that he wanted to prepare the same for publication, or that he did not agree with the content of the GAEL and wanted to undertake an entirely different approach. See Hedges, Smith, and Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3*, 130

Second, it remains as yet “unclear when in 1835 Joseph Smith began creating the existing Book of Abraham manuscripts or what relationship the Book of Abraham manuscripts have to the Egyptian-language documents.”<sup>13</sup>

Third, while “considerable overlap of themes exists between the Book of Abraham and the Egyptian-language documents, . . . most of the Book of Abraham is not textually dependent on any of the extant Egyptian-language documents. The inverse is also true: most of the content in the Egyptian-language documents is independent of the Book of Abraham.”<sup>14</sup>

Fourth, and finally, the Egyptian-language documents were never presented as authoritative revelation. “What emerges most clearly from a closer look at the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” observed Nibley in his pioneering study, “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.”<sup>15</sup> With this in mind, the Egyptian-language documents might be understood as part of “an interest in ancient languages within the early church and an anticipation that additional ancient texts would be revealed.”<sup>16</sup> This interest prompted Joseph Smith and those close to him to attempt a secular study of other ancient languages such as Hebrew and Greek,<sup>17</sup> and the Egyptian-language project could perhaps be situated in this same context.

There is still much that we do not know about the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, including the precise circumstances surrounding their creation and purpose. While their ultimate nature remains debated, recent scholarship has called into question older assumptions and arguments about the extent of Joseph Smith’s participation in the Egyptian-language

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n. 576; and Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 37. In any case, it complicates how to understand Joseph Smith’s role in the composition of the Kirtland-era Egyptian language GAEL document.

13. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xxv. For different arguments on the direction of the dependency between the Book of Abraham and the Egyptian-language documents, see Hauglid, “Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project,” 474–511; and Kerry Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of Their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 33–37.

14. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xxv.

15. Nibley, “Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” 399.

16. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xxi.

17. See Matthew J. Grey, “‘The Word of the Lord in the Original’: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 249–302; and John W. Welch, “Joseph Smith’s Awareness of Greek and Latin,” in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 303–28.

project and the Book of Abraham's dependency on these manuscripts.<sup>18</sup> In the meantime, what can be safely concluded is that "although we have incomplete information on exactly how the Book of Abraham was translated, the resulting contents of that translation are more important than the process itself."<sup>19</sup>

### Further Reading

- Gee, John. "Joseph Smith and the Papyri." In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 13–42. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
- Hauglid, Brian M. "The Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project: 'A Knowledge of Hidden Languages.'" In *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges, 474–511. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015.
- Muhlestein, Kerry. "How Did Joseph Smith Translate the Book of Abraham?" In *Let's Talk about the Book of Abraham*, 52–66. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2022.
- Nibley, Hugh. "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers." *BYU Studies* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1971): 350–99. Reprinted in Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee, 502–68. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 18. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009.

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18. See, for example, John Gee, "Prolegomena to a Study of the Egyptian Alphabet Documents in the Joseph Smith Papers," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 77–98.

19. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 39.