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The Relationship between the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri

It is clear that Joseph Smith's inspired translation of the Book of Abraham was connected to the Egyptian papyri he acquired in summer 1835. However, less clear is the precise relationship between the Book of Abraham text and the papyri. "Several theories posit ways in which the Book of Abraham text relates to the papyri. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints maintains that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham from papyri, but they do not specify which papyri. Theories about the relationship may be categorized under three heads: Joseph Smith produced the Book of Abraham (1) from the fragments of papyri that we still have, (2) from papyri that we no longer have, or (3) without the aid of any of the Joseph Smith Papyri."¹

Exploring these theories individually reveals that while they each have some evidence for them, "not all of the theories account equally for the historical evidence. It is [also] worth knowing some of the problems associated with the various theories. Whichever theory one chooses to follow, one must be prepared to deal with the problems posed by the evidence that the theory cannot account for."²

Theory 1: Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham from the extant papyri fragments.

The proponents of this theory maintain that Joseph Smith either pretended to translate or mistakenly thought he was translating the Book of Abraham from the surviving fragments of the Hor Book of Breathings

1. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 83.

2. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 84.

(P. Joseph Smith I, XI+X).³ The two main pieces of evidence cited by proponents of this theory are (1) the hieratic Egyptian characters from the Book of Breathing (P. Joseph Smith XI) that appear in the margins of the early Book of Abraham manuscripts and (2) the proximity of the original vignette for Facsimile 1 at the beginning of the Hor Book of Breathing and the apparent reference to this illustration in the Book of Abraham text claiming it is “at the commencement of this record” (Abr. 1:12, 14).⁴ At first glance, these two pieces of evidence may appear persuasive, but other scholars have disputed their explanatory power in connecting the English text of the Book of Abraham to the text in the surviving fragments.

For example, there is evidence that casts doubt on whether any of the existing Book of Abraham manuscripts is the original manuscript. With respect to the extant manuscript copies of the Book of Abraham, it is not clear who placed the hieratic characters from the Book of Breathing in the margins or when they were added. It is also not clear what the scribe was thinking when he added the characters. It has been widely assumed that they were copied at Joseph Smith’s direct prompting during the process of translation, but this is not certain.⁵

3. Grant S. Heward and Jerald Tanner, “The Source of the Book of Abraham Identified,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1968): 92–99; Christopher C. Smith, “‘That Which Is Lost’: Assessing the State of Preservation of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 69–83; 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), 474–511; Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 109–222. Latter-day Saints who accept this theory tend to separate what they see as the inspired revelation Joseph Smith received that produced the text of the Book of Abraham with his mistaken assumption about the source of that text. In this way of thinking, the Prophet’s divine inspiration must be compartmentalized with his own natural assumptions, which may or may not be true.

4. Heward and Tanner, “Source of the Book of Abraham Identified,” 92–99; Smith, “‘That Which Is Lost,’” 73.

5. See the discussion in 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): 32–36; Kerry Muhlestein, “The Explanation-Defying Book of Abraham,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 81–82, 84–85; and Kerry Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light*

“Though the juxtaposition of the characters and Book of Abraham text implies a relationship between the two, the exact nature of that relationship is not stated” and is complicated by the evidence that the manuscripts which bear these marginal characters appear to be copies of an earlier text that is no longer extant.⁶ Any assumed relationship between the two remains an assumption.

The second point of evidence (the reference to Facsimile 1 at Abr. 1:12, 14) is likewise more complicated than is often supposed. For starters, scholars have recognized that the last line of Abraham 1:12 (“I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record”) and all of Abraham 1:14 (“That you may have an understanding of these gods, I have given you the fashion of them in the figures at the beginning, which manner of figures is called by the Chaldeans Rahleenos, which signifies hieroglyphics”) are interlinear insertions in the earliest manuscript copy of the Book of Abraham.⁷ Even if one assumes these references were original and not added later, this does not fully explain what these verses mean. While the text does seem to say that the vignette is adjacent to it, it could, alternatively, be read as indicating “that the vignette depicting the altar and idols is not adjacent to the text but some distance from it.”⁸ A phrase such as “at the beginning” or “at the commencement” could be referring to something one sentence or ten paragraphs away.

Theory 2: Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham from a missing papyrus fragment.

This theory has gained traction as scholars have looked more closely at nineteenth-century eyewitness descriptions of the papyrus believed to be the source of the Book of Abraham. “The nineteenth-century eyewitnesses, both Mormon and non-Mormon, favorable and hostile to the Church, agree that the Book of Abraham was translated from a long roll of papyrus that was still a long roll in the 1840s and 1850s. The current fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri, however, were all mounted on heavy paper and placed in glass frames in 1837. None of them can

on *Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 228–29.

6. Brent M. Rogers and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 74–75.

7. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 143; Rogers and others, *Documents, Volume 5*, 78; Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 195–96, 239 nn. 57, 64.

8. Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 29–32, quote at 30; compare Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham,” 225–26.

be the long roll described in the 1840s and 1850s. So these fragments are specifically not the source of the Book of Abraham according to the eyewitnesses.”⁹

The main advantage to this theory is that it can better account for the nineteenth-century eyewitness evidence. It also answers the objections raised by those who rightly point out that none of the surviving Joseph Smith Papyri fragments translate as the Book of Abraham. However, this theory has been criticized on the grounds that while there are indeed missing portions of papyri (for example, Facsimiles 2 and 3 are no longer extant), it is questionable whether there is enough missing papyrus to accommodate a hypothetical Book of Abraham text.¹⁰ In addition, even though “this theory accounts for [the eyewitness] evidence,” it is still “frustrating to many people. Because the papyri are no longer extant, there is no possible way to check Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Abraham.”¹¹

Theory 3: Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham by revelation but not from the papyri he possessed.

This theory argues that the Book of Abraham was not on the papyri that Joseph Smith possessed but that he translated it merely by pondering over the papyri. As an essay published by the Church recently articulated,

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

9. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 85, and also 4–5; compare John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 175–217; Kerry Muhlestein, “Papyri and Presumptions: A Careful Examination of the Eyewitness Accounts Associated with the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 4 (October 2016): 31–50.

10. One of the main points of contention is whether it can be mathematically calculated how much papyrus is currently missing and what was potentially contained on the missing portion. For different arguments, see John Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 117–23; Andrew W. Cook and Christopher C. Smith, “The Original Length of the Scroll of Hôr,” *Dialogue* 43, no. 4 (2010): 1–42; John Gee, “Formulas and Faith,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 1 (2012): 60–65; Smith, “That Which Is Lost,” 69–83; and Muhlestein, “Papyri and Presumptions,” 31–50. See also the cautionary remarks in Eshbal Ratzon and Nachum Dershowitz, “The Length of a Scroll: Quantitative Evaluation of Material Reconstructions,” *PLOS One* 15, no. 10 (2020): 1–26.

11. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 85.

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.¹²

Those who adopt this theory urge Latter-day Saints to reconsider the scope and mechanism of "translation" in Joseph Smith's teachings and scriptural productions.¹³ The strength of this theory is that it is consistent with some of the Prophet's other scriptural productions. "One advantage is that in Doctrine and Covenants section 7, Joseph Smith translated an ancient papyrus that he never had in his possession; hence, there is a precedent for Joseph Smith translating a papyrus that was not in his possession, and so there is no reason to suppose that he had to have the papyrus of the Book of Abraham in his possession either."¹⁴ At the same time, however, the main drawback to this theory is that Joseph Smith himself believed that he possessed a physical record of Abraham and claimed when he published the text that it was a "translation of some ancient records . . . upon papyrus."¹⁵

It could be argued that some of these (and other) theories might be combined to form new paradigms. "As scholars continue to find, research, and analyze the evidence that bears on this subject, future studies will undoubtedly illuminate other theories that have not yet been conceived."¹⁶ Since The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has not taken an official stance on how the translation of the Book of

12. "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>.

13. See Karl C. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham, and Joseph Smith as Translator," *Dialogue* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 17–38; Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 193–232.

14. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 85.

15. "Book of Abraham," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704; Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 85–86.

16. Kerry Muhlestein, "Joseph Smith and Egyptian Artifacts: A Model for Evaluating the Prophetic Nature of the Prophet's Ideas about the Ancient World," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2016): 67.

Abraham was accomplished other than it was done by revelation, and since the evidence is not as clear or as complete as we might like, it would perhaps be wisest for readers to worry less about the method of the translation and more about the results.

Further Reading

Gee, John. "The Relationship of the Book of Abraham Text to the Papyri."

In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 83–86. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.

Muhlestein, Kerry. "The Explanation-Defying Book of Abraham." In *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, edited by Laura Harris Hales, 79–91. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016.

———. "Joseph Smith and Egyptian Artifacts: A Model for Evaluating the Prophetic Nature of the Prophet's Ideas about the Ancient World." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2016): 35–82.