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Egyptianisms in the Book of Abraham

One way of determining whether the Book of Abraham is a translation of an underlying Egyptian document or whether it was originally composed in English is to see if the text contains what might be called Egyptianisms, or literary and linguistic features of the Egyptian language. The presence of Egyptianisms in the text of the Book of Abraham “might indicate some knowledge of Egyptian on Joseph Smith’s part.”¹ Because “Egyptian was not really understood in Joseph Smith’s day,”² any knowledge of Egyptian Joseph Smith may have possessed could only have come by revelation.

A careful reading of the Book of Abraham does reveal some potential Egyptianisms in the English text. For example, “the earliest manuscript containing Abraham 1:17 reads ‘and this because ~~their hearts are turned~~ they have turned their hearts away from me.’ The phrase ‘their hearts are turned’ was crossed out and ‘they have turned their hearts’ was written immediately afterwards. In Egyptian of the time period of the Joseph Smith Papyri the passive is expressed by the use of a third person plural. So the two phrases would be identical in Egyptian. The translator has to decide which way to render the passage.”³

Paronomasia, or wordplay, is another attested feature of ancient Egyptian literature that also appears in the Book of Abraham.⁴ In

1. John Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” 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; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 442.

2. Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” 443.

3. Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” 442.

4. See Siegfried Morenz, “Wortspiele in Ägypten,” in *Festschrift Johannes Jahn zum 22. November 1957* (Leipzig, Ger.: E. A. Seemann Verlag, 1957), 23–32; Antonio Loprieno, “Puns and Word Play in Ancient Egyptian,” in *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew*

Abraham 3, the Lord showed Abraham a panoramic view of the cosmos and then a vision of the spirits in the premortal council in heaven. Half-way through this vision, the Lord shifts from discussing the gradation and hierarchy of heavenly bodies to discussing the gradation and hierarchy of spiritual beings:

Now, if there be two things, one above the other, and the moon be above the earth, then it may be that a *planet* or a *star* may exist above it; and there is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it. Howbeit that he made the greater *star*; as, also, if there be two *spirits*, and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two *spirits*, notwithstanding one is more intelligent than the other, have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for they are gnolaum, or eternal. (Abr. 3:17–18, emphasis added)

This shift plausibly appears to pivot on a play on words in Egyptian. The Egyptian word for “spirit” (*ꜥḥ*) resembles the word for the “light and brilliance” (*iꜥḥ*) of celestial bodies, including stars, as well as the word for the circumpolar stars (*iḥm*), which were identified with the spirit of the deceased king in texts predating Abraham.⁵ The Book of Abraham’s conceptual linkage of souls or spirits with heavenly bodies such as stars works particularly well from an Egyptian perspective, since “the stars could additionally be identified with the *akhs* [spirits] of the deceased by virtue of these latter’s connection with the light and brilliance (*iꜥḥ*) typical of celestial bodies.”⁶ This means that from an Egyptian perspective the astronomical teachings of the Book of Abraham “flow seamlessly into teachings about the preexistence which follow immediately thereafter.”⁷

Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature, ed. Scott B. Noegel (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2000), 3–20; Penelope Wilson, *Hieroglyphs: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 62–69; and Barbara A. Richter, *The Theology of Hathor of Dendera: Aural and Visual Scribal Techniques in the Per-Wer Sanctuary* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2016), 13–19.

5. Silvia Zago, “Classifying the Duat: Tracing the Conceptualization of the Afterlife between Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts,” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 145, no. 2 (2018): 212; Scott B. Noegel, “Wordplay” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 167.

6. Zago, “Classifying the Duat,” 212; compare Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 80–81.

7. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 117, 119.

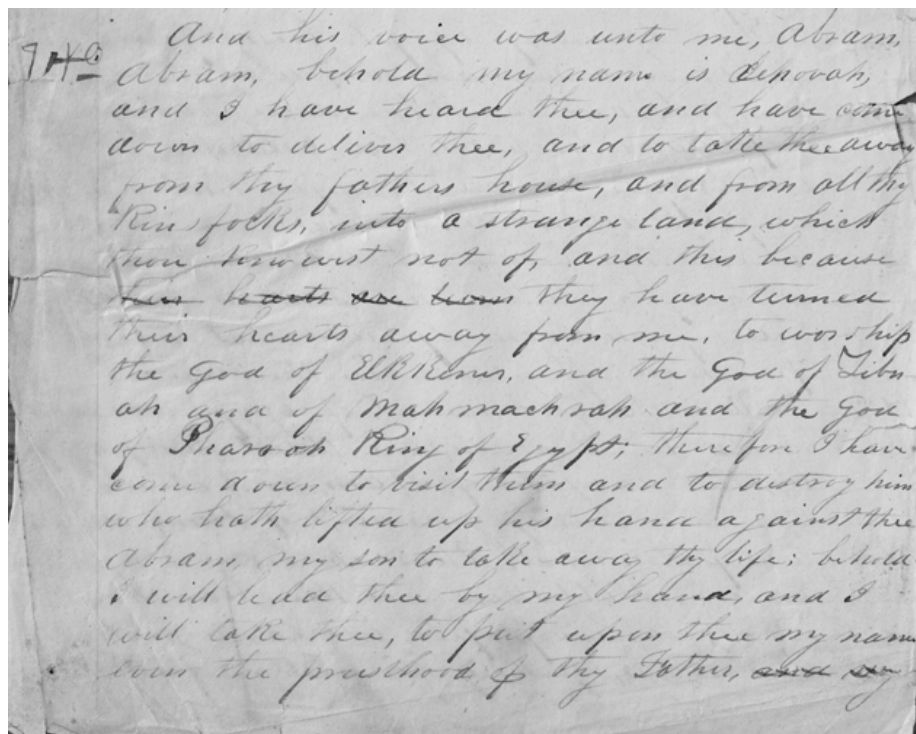


FIGURE 25. “Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–B,” 3. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Lines 7–9 in the second full paragraph read, “And this because their harts are turn they have turned their hearts away from me.”

The question remains whether Abraham himself was responsible for these Egyptianisms or whether they were the result of later scribes and copyists. Abraham appears to have been writing to a non-Egyptian audience (presumably his own kinsfolk or descendants), and it is currently unknown what language he originally spoke.⁸ While Abraham taught the relationship between stars and spirits to the Egyptians, and their own language and literary culture would have supported paronomasia, it is possible that these Egyptianisms were introduced in the later copy of Abraham’s writings that was preserved on the papyri acquired by Joseph Smith. This, in turn, could potentially explain how Egyptianisms appear in a text written for Abraham’s Hebrew posterity.

8. Eric Jay Olson, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign* 12, no. 6 (June 1982): 35–36.

While these Egyptianisms in the Book of Abraham do not indisputably prove that Joseph Smith was translating from ancient Egyptian, they are consistent with his claims to have done so.

Further Reading

Gee, John. "Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt." In *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges, 427–48. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015.