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# Judging and Prejudging the Book of Abraham

An international symposium of scholars held in Los Angeles in 1972 was devoted to the discussion of ancient autobiographical writings attributed to Abraham which, until recently, have lain in a state of total neglect.<sup>1</sup> The most important of these writings, the so-called *Apocalypse of Abraham*, was first translated into English in the pages of a Latter-day Saint periodical, the *Improvement Era*, in 1898, the year in which G. Nathanael Bonwetsch first edited the text and translated it into German. At that time some striking points of resemblance were noted between the ancient writing and Joseph Smith's Book of Abraham. With renewed interest after eighty years, the parallels appear more impressive than ever and are being seriously considered by non-Mormon scholars. The point of this is not that either the ancient texts or the Joseph Smith version need be accepted as authentic,

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*This 1979 manuscript appeared as an appendix in Robert L. and Rosemary Brown, They Lie in Wait to Deceive, ed. Barbara Ellsworth, rev. ed. (Mesa: Brownsworth, 1982), 1:236–45.*

1. In September 1972 the Society of Biblical Literature Pseudepigrapha Seminar at the International Congress of Learned Societies in the Field of Religion organized a symposium on "The Testament of Abraham and Related Studies."

but that the latter is a work of real substance and should be carefully read by those who would judge it. Instead of which it has been noisily denounced as a complete fraud on the grounds that it could not have been translated in a certain way. In what way? By a fantastical procedure which the critics themselves have invented and palmed off on Joseph Smith. Did the Book of Abraham come out of nothing? Was it the product of worse than nothing, a farrago of philological gropings which Joseph Smith himself threw up as an insuperable obstacle to his own work of translation? Let us look more closely.

Q. The “Fall of the Book of Abraham” routinely proclaimed throughout the land for the last 145 years has been heralded anew in the present decade [the seventies], and the contemporary critics announce that some Mormon students are in agreement with them. How is that?

A. That claim clearly demonstrates their methods. It is perfectly possible for Latter-day Saint students to applaud their willingness to discuss matters, and the zeal and dedication with which they go about it, but that by no means is to be taken as an endorsement of their opinions—which is the way they make it seem. In commending the diligence of the critics (and deploring the unpreparedness of the Latter-day Saints to deal with materials with which they should be thoroughly familiar), one does not for a moment find the results of their work in the least convincing—quite the contrary, the evidence which their hostile voices have supplied goes far to disproving their assertions.

Q. What are the specific charges?

A. (1) We are asked to see Joseph Smith diligently composing an alphabet and grammar of the Egyptian language, (2) by employing which he works out the translation of the Book of Abraham from certain Egyptian characters in his possession. (3) The source of those characters, and the Egyptian writing called the Book of Breathings, suddenly surfaces in 1967, and it does not contain anything suggesting

the Book of Abraham. (4) Therefore the Book of Abraham is a fraud.

Q. Isn't that evidence enough to convict?

A. Only if the charges are true. But none of them will hold water. Let us consider them in order.

1. Joseph Smith never produced an alphabet or grammar of the Egyptian language.<sup>2</sup> What was repeatedly and falsely put forth as "Joseph Smith's Original Alphabet and Grammar" was an enterprise in which a number of men engaged. The leader of the project was W. W. Phelps, and by far the greatest part of the writing is in his hand. Phelps had an ambitious plan for methodically working out an Egyptian grammar and alphabet, but it quickly became apparent that the approach was not a fruitful one, and it was at once dropped for good.

Q. But wasn't Smith in on it?

A. He was indeed, sharing his ideas with the others, for both works were purely speculative and exploratory.

Q. How do you know that?

A. Because of the six men participating, each makes his own contribution; no two of their interpretations are identical. The whole thing is quite fluid. The men are admittedly exploring and interpreting. Most importantly, the project never got off the ground. The most ambitious version of the grammar, that of Phelps, ground to a halt after a single page, and his equally ambitious alphabet was given up after a page and a half, before the second letter was completed.

Q. Then what is behind it?

A. Obviously they were doing what they explicitly stated they were doing—that is, trying to produce an alphabet and grammar of the Egyptian language; nothing was said about a project of translating the Book of Abraham. Their interest in such an enterprise was perfectly legitimate and

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2. For a fuller treatment of the alphabet and grammar (or, more correctly, the Kirtland Egyptian Papers), see "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," in this volume, CWHN 18:502–68.

understandable. They had priceless Egyptian manuscripts in their possession and were irresistibly drawn to search for clues. The decipherment of Egyptian was a problem which excited many at the time, and the School of the Prophets had a legitimate and honest interest in the study of biblical and related languages. At the time Phelps made independent attempts at translating parts of the Bible; Oliver Cowdery, one of the group, had eagerly sought some years before to translate “the engravings of old records, which are ancient” (D&C 8:1). The instructions given Cowdery in the matter are extremely important; he is not to expect the power to translate to come to him as a gift: “you must [first] study it out in your mind,” and only “then you must ask me if it be right,” with no guarantee of acceptance (D&C 9:7–8). This is the process we see going on in the Egyptian exercises.

Q. The critics say that the grammar proves that Joseph Smith did not know Egyptian.

A. Nobody ever said he did; his translations were “given to him” as the expression went, by direct revelation. If he did know it, why would he be sweating over a grammar and alphabet?

Q. Then Joseph Smith did write an Egyptian grammar?

A. He did not. He would very much have liked to, for the subject intrigued him to the end of his life, when he suggested the possibility of such an undertaking in the future.

Q. But why should he have been so interested in alphabets and grammars if not to help him translate?

A. This brings us to our second point which is that:

2. The alphabet and grammar were not used in any translation. It is important to note that the Prophet had a real interest in ancient languages and studied them the hard way, but only after he had completed all his inspired translations. Thus he studied Hebrew and German along with the brethren and looked about for a teacher of Greek, but that lively interest in languages blossomed in Kirtland only after he had finished his new translation of the Bible, translating

the Book of Abraham at the same time. Greek and Hebrew dictionaries and grammars were available for their studies, but what about Egyptian? They would have to do what students of exotic languages have always done, what the scholars of the sixteenth century did when confronted by strange Greek, Syriac, or Coptic texts—they would have to make their own dictionaries and grammars. Joseph Smith's translation of the Old Testament was one thing; his Hebrew and German lessons long after were something else entirely. Likewise, his translation of the Book of Abraham was one thing, while his discussions and speculations and intellectual flights with the brethren in Kirtland were again something else.

Q. You mean they were interested only in making a grammar? Wouldn't they need it for translating the Book of Abraham?

A. That suggestion is the wildest of all in view of the evidence. Just look at those documents—could anyone possibly use them for anything? Just try it. The opposition have loudly proclaimed that the grammar and alphabet shows exactly how Joseph Smith did his translation, the precise *modus operandi* he followed, as they put it. Well, let someone show us how the *modus operandi* works. To date no one has tried to turn the key—understandably, since it won't fit the lock. Aside from the wild nature of the stuff, we have seen that there isn't nearly enough alphabet or grammar to be of any use to anyone; they didn't really get started on them before they gave them up. But aside from that, the characters that meet us in the alphabet and grammar never turn up in the attempts at fitting Egyptian characters to the Book of Abraham. The 125 proper names and 79 numerals in the alphabet and grammar nowhere appear in Abraham's book. Even if the alphabet and grammar could have been used as an aid to translation, it was not so used.

This brings up the matter of those other documents that do look very much like an attempt at translation—that is,

where Egyptian characters appear in a margin on the left-hand side of the page while the rest of the page is filled with writing from the Book of Abraham.

At first glance it looks as if it may have been a translation, but a second glance wipes out even the remotest possibility of such a thing, as the critics themselves have been at pains to point out. A certain Mr. Heward went to the trouble of passing out handbills on Temple Square at a general conference, asking the Mormons to accept as sacred truth from him that the juxtaposition of Egyptian characters and English text proves that the one could not possibly by any stretch of the imagination be a translation of the other. The disproportion between the characters is staggering: How could one dot tell the whole story of Little Red Riding Hood in all its harrowing details? Mr. Heward asked. There is only one answer; everything shows that this was not a translation and was not viewed as such.

Q. Even when the two texts are found side by side?

A. If the juxtaposition made sense translation-wise, then it might be used as evidence that this was intended as a translation. As it is, the juxtaposition effectively refutes the thesis. First there is that absurd disproportion between, for example, three short strokes of a scribe's brush and a whole paragraph of English text—including parenthetical remarks and at least a dozen proper names—all in three strokes and a dot! Along with that there is the meaningless spacing of the characters opposite the English Abraham text: characters where none should be, intruding in the middle of a phrase or word; no characters where such are indispensable, as at the beginning of a new paragraph or episode; characters placed squarely between lines so that no one can tell which line they are supposed to go with. Then there is the sloppy and indifferent drawing of the characters; though each tiny detail is supposed to contain whole sentences of meaning, each of the researchers draws his own symbols, putting in or leaving out lines and dots with easy abandon.

All this is understandable only if the characters are treated as expendable, consulted in the process of trying out various possible clues to help in the composing of an Egyptian grammar and abandoned when they failed to work. We know they were considered expendable because they were dispensed with four-fifths of the time. Of the three "translation" texts, one of them has no Egyptian characters whatever, though like the others it is labeled "Translation of some ancient records," etc., as is the present-day Book of Abraham, showing that the word *translation* does not refer to those particular characters. Even in the two manuscripts in which they appear, those of Phelps and Parrish, the Egyptian characters put in an appearance only part of the time: both these exercises dispense with them and preempt their margins when they become a nuisance. In all there are only eighteen Egyptian words employed in the "translation," all taken from the first two lines of a text of forty-five lines.

We do not have here the process of deriving one text from another, but simply that of placing two completed texts side by side for comparison.

Q. Completed?

A. Certainly. The Egyptian characters are copied from a Book of Breathings text, and the Abraham passages from a completed text of the Book of Abraham, as is perfectly apparent from the state of all the manuscripts. The Abraham sections are found in three manuscripts and are the same in all three, copied out each time in a fair hand without erasures, corrections, substitutions, or alterations, without the slightest indication of the laborious business of translation—there is nothing here but the simple mechanical task of neatly copying out a finished text. The margins should also be noted: they were drawn in before either text was written down: the English was easily accommodated to them, but the Egyptian was not. If any attempted translation was going on, the English side of the ledger would have been very messy indeed instead of a model of tidiness.

There is one notable exception to the obvious lack of any rational attempt to match up the English and Egyptian.

Q. What is that?

A. Phelps made a bold and ambitious start with his copy; beginning with the top line he starts out by placing numbers beside the Egyptian characters, matching each one by the same number marking an English word opposite. This looks like business; Phelps is determined on a systematic study even as he was working away at the alphabet and grammar. And that is what makes this so significant, for Phelps never got any further than the number three—after the first three characters he gives up, while the neat four columns of classification into which he has divided the page are abandoned at the same time—the whole thing collapses before our eyes before it has even gotten properly started. It was a nice try, but Phelps could see that it was getting nowhere.

Q. Can we be sure of that?

A. We can. If the men of Kirtland knew they had a real thing going in this operation, they would have stuck with it; if they were getting anywhere at all with their exciting project, they would have carried on for more than a mere two pages of alphabet and grammar and ventured beyond barely two lines of Egyptian characters from a text containing 45 lines. If their studies were making progress, they would have continued them; and if they had hit upon something valid, they would have announced it. As it is, nothing is more impressive than the promptness and finality with which the alphabet, grammar, and “translation” projects were dropped the moment it became apparent that they were up a blind alley. The state of the manuscripts makes that perfectly clear. Equally significant, however, is the care that was taken to avoid misleading anyone, raising false hopes, or giving false impressions. The whole business was strictly confidential in nature; these speculations and probings never got out of a closed academic circle. Again it is the

opposition who make this clearest when they play up their own role in bringing to light “hidden documents,” as they put it, writings “suppressed for 130 years.” Well, they were suppressed and forgotten; they were never publicized or circulated. No claims were ever put forward for these writings, no explanation ever given for them. It was not the Prophet’s habit to suppress anything he felt was true and relevant to the gospel. On the contrary, his calling was to make everything known. He translated and published the Book of Mormon to the world in the face of universal opposition and contempt, and he told everyone just how he got it and how he translated it. He was not one to hold anything back. If the Kirtland Papers were thought of as inspired or even reasonably helpful, they would have been expanded, used, and their worth announced to the world. The strictly confidential nature of the work tells us just what kind of an exercise it was—never circulated, never given out to the members of the Church or the general public—no one was corrupted by it. Now if the brethren had continued after they saw they were going nowhere, then we might charge them with deceiving themselves if not others. But they did not. They were pursuing the same trial-and-error course that scholars and scientists must needs follow. And the results were not more fantastic than the speculations, translations, and interpretations of the facsimiles brought forth by students both inside and outside of the Church to this very day, and that in an environment of graduate study and large university libraries such as the men of Joseph Smith’s day never dreamed of.

The behavior of the participants in the philological exercises of Kirtland after the project was abandoned is also not without significance. At the very time the work on the alphabet, grammar, and translation came to a halt, all but one of the five men engaged in it with Joseph Smith turned against the Prophet, denounced him in the strongest terms, and were cut off from the Church. Why? Mostly because they

were jealous of him—especially Phelps, who was far better educated than the Prophet, had studied classical languages, and at that time had tried his own hand at translation. All but one of these men returned to the Church and begged the Prophet's forgiveness, which he freely granted. But though these temporary renegades told every manner of lie to make the Prophet seem ridiculous and deluded in the eyes of the world, they never mentioned any indiscretions in the matter of the Book of Abraham.

Q. Wouldn't that be because they were in it together with him?

A. On the contrary, they exploited to the hilt precisely those secrets which they claimed to have shared most intimately with him. If they mention no dubious activity in this case, it is because there was none. Warren Parrish, the one who never came back, said later in an interview, "I have set by his side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration of Heaven."<sup>3</sup> Direct revelation is not the same thing as grammar-making; it is the same way all Smith's other inspired translations were made. It should be clear to anyone who has looked into the ample evidence available on the subject of Joseph Smith's activities as a translator that we are wasting our time trying to figure out the laborious exercises of the brethren at Kirtland. For that was not Smith's way of translating at all. We may not ignore such decisive information as that when the Prophet translated the Book of Abraham he had already done the immense Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses, and the new translation of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments—all done by revelation, as it needs must be. He was making his final review of the inspired translation of the Bible at the very time he brought out the Book of Abraham, and the Church acquired the *Times and Seasons* for the express purpose of publishing

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3. Warren Parrish, letter to the editor, *Painesville Republican*, 15 February 1838.

the two—the Bible translations and the Book of Abraham—together as parts of a single project. Since he used no grammar or dictionaries in rendering the corrected Bible text, even though such aids were available in abundance, why should he mock the Spirit and give himself the enormous handicap of constructing a preliminary handbook of grammar to aid him in an activity in which he had been successfully engaged for years?

Q. Then what is the connection between the Book of Abraham and the Book of Breathings, from which all are agreed it cannot possibly have been derived?

A. This is our third point.

3. It was an exploratory and experimental exercise. The men of Kirtland, when they wanted to know more about Egyptian, did what any scientist or scholar will do to solve a difficult problem—that is, he must try any and every approach to the problem. If he is completely in the dark, every possibility and suggestion, no matter how absurd it may appear, must be considered. You cannot make a grammar or alphabet of any language if you don't have at least one example of a translation—without a Rosetta Stone you will get nowhere. And the Book of Abraham offered the brethren the only exemplar of a sure translation from the Egyptian. They compared it with various texts, trying it on for size.

Q. How do we know that?

A. Because Smith explicitly describes another Egyptian manuscript which he says was the real Book of Abraham. It was, he reports, (a) perfectly preserved, (b) beautifully written, and (c) containing rubrics—passages in red ink. On each of these points the Book of Breathings manuscript fails conspicuously to qualify.

Q. Then where is the other manuscript?

A. That is one of those questions that should have been asked the moment it became apparent that nobody could have taken the Book of Breathings connection seriously. The

fact is that the manuscripts at present in the possession of the Church represent only a fraction of the Joseph Smith Papyri. As President Joseph F. Smith stood in the front doorway of the Nauvoo House with some of the brethren in 1906, the tears streamed down his face as he told how he remembered “as if it were yesterday” his “Uncle Joseph” down on his knees on the floor with Egyptian manuscripts spread out all around him, peering at the strange writings and jotting things down in a little green notebook with the stub of a pencil. When one considers that the eleven fragments now in our possession can be easily spread out on the top of a small desk, without straining the knees, back, and dignity, it would seem that what is missing is much more than what we have. Another indication of this has recently come forth. In the summer of 1979, there was brought to light an old legal document transferring ownership of the Joseph Smith Egyptian effects, in which it was stated that the original materials were divided into four parts, one part being kept in a box, and the rest divided into three portions that went to three different parties. Now what the Church obtained in 1967 was one facsimile out of three, and the Book of the Dead fragments that would seem to represent about a third of the standard text; this was the portion that went to the son of Major Bidamon’s housekeeper, it being her share from the Major, who had the whole lot from his wife Emma, who had it from the Prophet—a fair estimate is that we have here but tattered remnants of some of the three (equal) parts not kept in the box.

Q. But the part that showed up in 1967 must contain the original Abraham text, for your Facsimile 1 was attached to it.

A. And what were the other two facsimiles attached to if not the Book of Abraham? There is a certain detachment of the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham from the text. Thus, the Book of Abraham is written in the first person—“I Abraham”—as the *Testament* and *Apocalypse of Abraham* happen to be. This is a rare and surprising phenomenon, while

the explanations to the facsimiles designate Abraham in the third person—they are Joseph Smith's own explanations. This, incidentally, follows the Egyptian usage.

Q. What is that?

A. The vignettes that accompany Egyptian texts often seem to have no apparent connection with them. Some recent studies have shown how common pictorial compositions, in particular the one made familiar to us by Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham, could be borrowed by ordinary Egyptians to be used, with minor alterations, as illustrations to their own autobiographies. That is certainly what is suggested in the facsimile to the Book of Abraham. From papers delivered in the above-mentioned symposium of 1972, one gathers that the *Testament of Abraham* is to be traced back to Hebrew writings of the first or second centuries A.D., showing strong Egyptian influence and aimed at reporting what Abraham would have revealed to his own children,<sup>4</sup> as one writer puts it, in his missing autobiography. Most significant is the thesis of one scholar that the contents of the apocryphal autobiography of Abraham were actually inspired in the first place by the contemplation of vignettes from the Egyptian Books of the Dead—making the story explain the pictures rather than the other way around. That means that we would have a Hebrew transmitter of an Abraham autobiography using the very same Egyptian picture book that Joseph Smith did to supply illustrations for his story. Obviously we are only beginning to get a glimmering of what is going on here.

4. But so far we have not paid any attention whatever to the actual charge brought against the Book of Abraham! The real question is not whether Joseph Smith knew Egyptian—no one has claimed that he did; or whether the Book of Abraham is translated from the Book of Breathings—that, by universal admission, is impossible; or whether Joseph

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4. See George W. E. Nickelsburg Jr., ed., *Studies on the Testament of Abraham* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976).

Smith was interested in producing an Egyptian grammar—he emphatically says that he was; or that the alphabet and grammar came to nothing—the men of Kirtland found it useless almost immediately and forgot it; or who is an Egyptologist and who is not—no one challenges their translations, but the true significance of the old texts and pictures remains a mystery to the expert and layman alike. It should be understood that the translations made of the Joseph Smith Papyri by Egyptologists were accepted without hesitation or reservation by the Mormons. This was not a case of secret documents being brought to light by the diligence of crusading scholars or of experts being given special access to carefully guarded documents or commissioned to make official translations of them, as the public has been misled to believe. As soon as the Church got the documents, leaders invited all the world to look at them, circulated excellent reproductions of the lot, and readily accepted the translations of the learned. There has never been any need for self-appointed experts to “expose” anything.

Q. Then what has been discovered?

A. That the men of Kirtland, after at least parts of the Book of Abraham had been translated, tried their hand at using those passages in the construction of an Egyptian grammar. That in no way impugns the validity of the Book of Abraham that is on trial.

Q. But doesn't it amount to the same thing? If the man used questionable methods and engaged in far-out speculations, doesn't that discredit his claim to translating by direct revelation?

A. On the contrary, the most singular contributions in every field of human endeavor have been made by persons who outraged the establishment by transcending the current rules. The productions of genius, to say nothing of divine revelation, are necessarily unconventional in method and offensive to the scholar, whose expert testimonies are highly prejudiced and, after all, only opinions. If the bringer

of ill news does not deserve the wrath of the king, neither is good news to be rejected out of hand because one suspects that the messenger is illiterate—all the better, since he cannot fake the thing. Let us assume, for example, that a reporter publishes what he calls an eyewitness account of the sinking of the Titanic, and it later turns out that the man was never on the Titanic. That shows him to be a rascal, but does it follow that his account is a fraud? Or does it follow from his deception that there never was a Titanic and that the whole story is a newspaper hoax? Actually the man's account may be accurate in the highest degree, based on careful research and scrupulous reporting by himself or others. That his claim to have been on the Titanic is fraudulent indeed makes his story suspect, but actually proves nothing as to its correctness. That must be checked from other, outside sources. The analogy is faulty, for Joseph Smith never made false claims; he never pretended to know Egyptian though his critics have always pounced on the assumption as an Achilles' heel. But he did put the Book of Abraham before the world as a true history, and that is a position that can be tested by tried and established methods.

Meantime, it is not the work of a fool. One must read it for oneself—to imagine the author painfully squeezing out this bold, forthright, original, and lucid narrative drop by drop from a meaningless jumble of hieratic characters painfully processed through a little scrap of alphabet and grammar makes no sense to anyone. The Book of Abraham invites the most rigorous and objective testing that comparative scholarship can apply. The noisy and protracted campaign to condemn it before such tests have been considered and to evade the real issue on the most fragmentary and controversial of evidence must now be succeeded by the serious study which this great scripture deserves.