

Response to LDS Essay: Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham

By Eric F. Nelson

On July 8, 2014, the Church published an essay concerning the Book of Abraham in the topical guide of LDS.org: [Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham](#). Oddly, the essay does not provide any definitive conclusions as to how the Book of Abraham came about but instead offers three different theories. Each theory is discussed below.

Theory 1: Joseph translated Egyptian papyri into English. The essay states:

Some evidence suggests that Joseph studied the characters on the Egyptian papyri and attempted to learn the Egyptian language. His history reports that, in July 1835, he was "continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients."

. . . it appears that Joseph Smith began translating portions of the book of Abraham almost immediately after the purchase of the papyri. Phelps apparently viewed Joseph Smith as uniquely capable of understanding the Egyptian characters: "As no one could translate these writings," he told his wife, "they were presented to President Smith. He soon knew what they were.

The evidence overwhelmingly supports the idea that Joseph believed that he literally translated (i.e. rendering from one language into another) the papyri into the Book of Abraham. First, Joseph created the "[Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language](#)" after obtaining the papyri, indicating that he was attempting a literal character-by-character translation.

Second, Joseph's own statements clearly indicate that he believed he was translating the papyri in the literal, traditional manner. For example:

- "I, with W[illiam] W. Phelps and O[liver] Cowdery, as scribes, commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham; another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, &c, a more full account will appear in their place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them.

"As Mr Chandler had been told that I could translate them, he brought me some of the characters, and I gave him the interpretation . . ." (From the [Joseph Smith Papers](#), July 6, 1835.)

- "[July, 1835] – The remainder of this month I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language s practiced by the ancients." (*History of the Church*, Vol. 2, pg. 238.)
- "October 1 [, 1835] – This afternoon labored on the Egyptian alphabet, in company with Brothers O. Cowdery and W.W. Phelps, and during the research, the principles of

astronomy as understood by Father Abraham" (*History of the Church*, Vol. 2, pg. 236.)

- "November 17, 1835 – Exhibited the alphabet of the ancient records, to Mr. Holmes, and some others." (*History of the Church*, Vol. 2, pg. 316.)
- "The record of Abraham and Joseph, found with the mummies, is beautifully written upon papyrus, with black, and small part red, ink or plant, in perfect preservation." (*History of the Church*, Vol. 2, pg. 348.)

The Church, however, has a serious problem if Joseph literally translated the papyri as he claimed. Every non-LDS Egyptologist, and a significant portion of LDS Egyptologists, who have examined the papyri in conjunction with the Book of Abraham have concluded that the Book of Abraham bears no relationship to the papyri. In fact, the Church's essay admits as much:

Neither the rules nor the translations in the grammar book correspond to those recognized by Egyptologists today. None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mentioned Abraham's name or any of the events recorded in the book of Abraham. Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the Book of Abraham.

In other words, the papyri that Joseph used to translate the Book of Abraham have nothing to do with the Book of Abraham. How, then, did the book come about? If Joseph literally translated the papyri (as he claimed and as the evidence suggests), then the most logical conclusion is this: Book of Abraham is a fraud.

Theory 2: The papyri translated into the Book of Abraham are missing. The essay states:

Eyewitnesses spoke of 'a long roll' or multiple 'rolls' of papyrus. Since only fragments survive, it is likely that much of the papyri accessible to Joseph when he translated the book of Abraham is not among these fragments. The loss of a significant portion of the papyri means the relationship of the papyri to the published text cannot be settled conclusively by reference to the papyri.

This theory first surfaced after Egyptologists discovered the conflict between the papyri in the Church's possession and the Book of Abraham. However, this theory is, at best, suspect. The theory originated from Hugh B. Nibley in a series of articles he published in 1968. According to Nibley, Joseph F. Smith visited the Joseph's Mansion House in Nauvoo in 1843 or 1844. During the visit, Joseph F. Smith saw the papyri and indicated that one of the rolls of papyrus, when unrolled on the floor, extended through two rooms of the Mansion House. However, there are numerous problems with this account. First, Joseph F. Smith was only five years old when he saw the papyri. Second, Joseph F. Smith did not describe the length of the papyrus until 1906, nearly 65 years after it occurred. Third, Nibley's depiction of the events relies on multiple levels of hearsay, as we do not have Joseph F. Smith's first-person account. Rather, Joseph F. Smith related his memory of the papyrus (which occurred 65 years earlier when he was five or six years old) to Preston Nibley (Hugh B. Nibley's older half-brother), who then relayed the story to Hugh B. Nibley, who then published the story in a series of articles in 1968. Clearly, Theory 2 is not based on reliable information.

Regardless, when the essay states that it only has a “fraction” of the papyri, the Church implies that the lost portion of the papyri is the actual source of the Book of Abraham. But scholars have mathematically measured the scroll and discredited this claim. For example, Egyptologist [Robert Ritner](#) (who published his findings in his book, “The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition,” 2013), as well Andrew W. Cook and Christopher C. Smith (who published their findings in their article, “[The Original Length of the Scroll of Hor](#),” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Winter 2010) have studied the issue extensively and determined that the Church has the vast majority of the original papyri.

Moreover, the Grammar and Alphabet that Joseph produced, along with the transcribed hieroglyphs and correlating interpretations of the hieroglyphs (which appear in the Book of Abraham), make it clear that Joseph had virtually no understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Notably, the Church’s essay makes a disingenuous claim in support of Theory 2: “The loss of a significant portion of the papyri means the relationship of the papyri to the published text cannot be settled conclusively by reference to the papyri.” The Church essentially claims that we cannot test Joseph’s translation because we do not have the actual fragments Joseph used. However, the Church admits that we do have three vignettes or facsimiles that Joseph claimed to have translated. These facsimiles appear in the canonized version of the Book of Abraham along with numerous footnotes containing Joseph’s translation of various depictions in the facsimiles. Oddly, the Church claims that we cannot test Joseph’s translation because we do not have the actual fragments Joseph used in translation while ignoring the fact that the Church possesses (and even published with the Book of Abraham) three facsimiles along with Joseph’s corresponding translation.

More importantly, the essay fails to explain why Joseph’s translations of the canonized facsimiles are conclusively refuted by Egyptologists.

Theory 3: Joseph did not translate the Book of Abraham in the traditional sense but received it via revelation. The essay states as follows:

Alternatively, 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."

As previously discussed, Joseph frequently used the word “translate” in reference to his work with the papyri. Accordingly, the Church theorizes that perhaps Joseph did not actually translate the Book of Abraham in the traditional sense but instead received it through revelation. The Church’s essay goes so far as to claim that "Joseph Smith did not claim to know the ancient languages of the records that he was translating." Therefore, the Church alters the definition of “translate” to mean that Joseph “transmitted” information about Abraham from a heavenly sphere to an earthly sphere. If we follow this logic, Joseph could have been presented with any object (including objects wholly unrelated to the Book of Abraham) and learned about the life and teachings of Abraham (or any other topic).

As a preliminary matter, the Church's assertion that Joseph "did not claim to know ancient languages" is inaccurate. As noted by Ritner, in Joseph Smith's published 1844 "Appeal to the Freemen of the State of Vermont, the 'Brave Green Mountain Boys,' and Honest Men," Smith claimed to know Chaldean and Egyptian, among other languages.

Regardless, the Church's re-definition of the term "translate" is accompanied with a variety of problems and unanswered questions. Why would Joseph need a physical object, such as the papyri, to receive revelation (particularly when he received numerous revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants without the assistance of a revelatory catalyst)? Why would Joseph pay \$2,400 to obtain papyri that bore no relationship to Abraham in order to then receive the Book of Abraham via revelation?

More importantly, why would Joseph (1) tell people he was translating the papyri; (2) study the Egyptian on the papyri; and (3) create an entire Grammar and Alphabet if he was not actually translating the papyri? Joseph clearly knew the difference between translation and revelation as evidenced the differing origins of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. Why, then, would he claim to have translated the Book of Abraham if he actually received it through revelation?

Simply stated, the Church's assertion that the papyri were merely a catalyst for revelation does not withstand careful scrutiny.