

“Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham” — A Response

Robert K. Ritner

The recent web posting on the Book of Abraham by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (hereafter the LDS church) represents new reflection on a document whose authenticity as *verifiable history* is now officially acknowledged to be in serious dispute.¹ Thus the position paper concludes with a concession by noting (unnamed) modern scholarly opposition to the Book of Abraham, followed by a defense against any such scholarly debate: “The veracity and value of the book of Abraham cannot be settled by scholarly debate concerning the book’s translation and historicity.” Rather, the truth of the book is sought in ways that cannot be verified externally, relying exclusively upon traditional faith: “a careful study of its teachings, sincere prayer, and the confirmation of the Spirit.”

Such a declaration may seem reasonable to those already predisposed to accept it, but on closer reading, the LDS church posting suggests discomfort with its own conclusions and reasoning. Not a single opposing scholar is mentioned by name, nor are their reasons for rejecting the Book of Abraham. Yet the LDS paper attempts to engage in scholarly debate from a one-sided position, repeatedly citing in the footnotes the same limited set of apologists who are primarily church employees at BYU in Provo. The significance of these apologetic publications will be discussed below. If scholarly dispute over translation and historicity is ultimately irrelevant, why bother to devote extended paragraphs to rebuttals of unmentioned objections on “Translation and the Book of Abraham,” “The Papyri,” and “The Book of Abraham and the Ancient World”?

The Problems

The published text of the Book of Abraham is accompanied by three woodcut “Facsimiles” with explanations authored by Joseph Smith himself. The facsimiles are all based on ancient Egyptian documents, and the Egyptian texts of all three can now be deciphered. In addition, the representations on all three conform to well-known Egyptian models. Facsimiles 1 and 3 represent sections of one papyrus: the “Breathing Permit of Hôr” (P. JS 1), part of the group of Egyptian texts purchased by Smith in 1835 and long thought lost in the Chicago fire of 1871. These papyri were rediscovered in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1967 and quickly transferred to the LDS church, which published the first photographs of the texts the next year in the church magazine *The Improvement Era*. Comparison of the surviving initial vignette of the Hôr papyrus with Facsimile 1 proves beyond doubt, as the LDS web post agrees, that it was “the vignette that became facsimile 1.” However, neither Facsimile 1 nor 2 is a true copy, and both contain added forgeries, including the human-head and knife of the supposed “idoltrous priest of Elkenah” (Fig. 3 on Facsimile 1) as can be seen in the crude pencil additions to the original papyrus sheet as mounted and

¹ <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>.

“improved” for publication by the LDS church in 1842.² Facsimile 2 derives from a separate burial, for an individual named Sheshonq. Large portions of this published “facsimile” were improperly inserted from unrelated papyri. All of Smith’s published “explanations” are incorrect, including the lone example defended by the new web posting: the water in which a crocodile is swimming (Fig. 12 of Facsimile 1), supposedly a representation of “the firmament over our heads ... but in this case, in relation to this subject, the Egyptians meant it to be to signify Shaumau, to be high, or the heavens.” Although Egyptians might place heavenly boats in the sky, that is not relevant “in this case” where the water is placed below the figures and represents the Nile, not the sky. The selective defense of these explanations by the church is telling, and all other explanations are simply indefensible except by distorting Egyptian evidence. In Facsimile 3, Smith confuses human and animal heads and males with females. No amount of special pleading can change the female “Isis the great, the god’s mother” (Facsimile 3, Fig. 2) into the male “King Pharaoh, whose name is given in the characters above his hand,” as even the LDS author Michael D. Rhodes accepts.³ Here Smith also misunderstands “Pharaoh” as a personal name rather than a title meaning “king,” so he reads “king king” for a goddess’s name that he claims to have understood on the papyrus!

The problems are by no means limited to the Facsimiles, since the text itself includes anachronistic and impossible expressions (including a “Potiphar’s Hill” located in Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham 1:10) and situations (supposed Egyptian rites of human sacrifice in Ur conducted by a priest of Pharaoh “after the manner of the Egyptians,” Abraham 1:11-12). Wherever one locates Ur of the Chaldees, human sacrifice dictated there by “priests of Pharaoh” is unbelievable to credible scholars of the Ancient Near East.⁴ Nor was there any “Pharaoh, the eldest son of Egyptus, the daughter of Ham” (Abraham 1:25). As previously noted, “Pharaoh” is a title, not a name. Neither is “Egyptus” (“Egypt”) an ancient Egyptian personal name, but the name for the primary temple in Memphis that became generalized *outside of Egypt* as a designation for the country. Accurate translation or revelation would not produce such basic errors.

The LDS reaction to these issues is confined to a few citations in the section on “The Book of Abraham and the Ancient World.” A brief response to some of these is in order. The posting cites the work of Kerry Muhlestein (in n. 36)⁵ in an attempt to prove that the religion-based human sacrifice at the order of Pharaoh “as described in Abraham 1:11-12, is an example of punishment now known to have been meted out during the Abrahamic era.” Whether or not Muhlestein expected to find such proof when he began his doctoral

² See R. K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition*, The Smith Pettit Foundation, 2011, released in paperback by Signature Books in 2013 with differing pagination. In either edition, for Facsimile 1 compare plates III and IV, and for Facsimile 2 compare plates XXII and XXIII.

³ See Ritner, *ibid*, pp. 139-141 (2011 edition) = pp. 173-175 (2013 edition).

⁴ See the discussion by Prof. Christopher Woods in Ritner, *ibid*, pp. 73-74 (2011 edition) = pp. 89-91 (2013 edition).

⁵ Kerry Muhlestein, *Violence in the Service of Order: The Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011.

study, the title of the published volume intentionally avoids the term “human sacrifice” in favor of “sanctioned killing,” and the thesis forthrightly concludes “that rebellion was the chief motive” for such executions (pp. 80 and 82). Muhlestein also rightly notes the complexity in distinguishing the civil terms “execution” or “capital punishment” from the more overtly religious term “human sacrifice” (pp. 5-8), particularly in a society where political and religious issues are not sharply distinguished. That ambiguity could be argued for the modern United States as well, since civil execution for murder is often linked to condemnation for killing in the Ten Commandments, a distinctly *religious* text. More to the point, however, while Muhlestein notes capital punishment for political rebellion and crimes against individuals and the state, including theft of temple property or resources, there is *no parallel* to the Book of Abraham’s intended “martyrdom” for refusing to worship the images of Egyptian gods. That would happen under Roman prosecution of Christians, but personal worship (or its refusal) was not a basic concern of the ancient Egyptian state. The LDS citation of Muhlestein’s work does not support the narrative of the Book of Abraham.

The web posting notes also two writings by John Gee (notes 44 and 45), purporting to prove a memory of the sacrifice of Abraham by Pharaoh in later Egypt. It is not fully accurate to claim that the third-century Demotic papyrus cited by Gee “connects Abraham with an illustration similar to facsimile 1 in the book of Abraham.” The text in question, a Leiden magical papyrus in Demotic Egyptian and Greek (P. Lugd. Bat. I 384 verso = PGM XII), does include a picture of a mummy attended by Anubis—mentioned by name—on a lion funerary couch (not an “altar”), but the text is a love compulsion spell intended to force a woman to submit to a male’s sexual lust, not a reflection of the Book of Abraham. As accompanying magical words of power the speaker recites: “..aydyo oryx thambyto abraam o epy ... planoyegxybyoth” etc. The string of abracadabra words does include “abraam,” and this spelling has been corrected to “Abraham” in a recent edition.⁶ However, the name is just one of a string of magical names and no more relevant to the image than “oryx thambyto” or “planoyegxybyoth.” Moreover, there is no intent here to represent a sacrifice, just Osiris tended by Anubis, who are both invoked to inflame the libido of the female victim of the spell. The body on the lion bed is certainly that of the deceased Osiris (as it is in Hôr’s vignette), not a threatened Abraham.

In combination with other borrowed Old Testament names, Abraham (in varying spellings) occurs as a name of power throughout the magical papyri, but there is no special connection with the lion bed. In PGM V, line 481, the magician invokes Zeus by declaring: “for I am Silthachooch, Lailam,” etc., mixing into the middle of the list a snippet of the Jewish blessing “Barouch Adonai, Eloï Abraam” (“Blessed be Jawhe, ... god of Abraham”).⁷ In PGM VII, line 315, the “famous name Abraam” begins a string of protective names combining Bes, Iabaoth, and “the son of the female falcon.”⁸ Most

⁶ H. D. Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 171.

⁷ Betz, *ibid*, p. 110.

⁸ Betz, *ibid*, pp. 126-127 (not translated as Abraham).

commonly, Abraam is invoked together with Isaac and Jacob as in the long list of magical names in PGM XII, 287 (... Saphtha Nouchitha Abraan Isak Iakkobi ...) or the probable targum extract in PGM XIII, 976.⁹ The latter papyrus also protects against the evil eye by declaring (among a string of magical names): “I have received the power of Abraam, Isak and Iakob, and of the great god, daimon IAO.”¹⁰ Another love compulsion spell invokes the Biblical account of Sodom and Gomorrah and concludes with a list of names mixing archangels, abracadabra words and Abraham: “I adjure you by the great Pap Tapheiao Sabbaoth Arbathiao Zagoure Pagoure and by the great Michael Zouriel Gabriel Sensengenbarpharanges Istraël Abraam, attract her, NN to NN.”¹¹ The use of the name Abraham in all of these magical passages derives from late Egyptian knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and contemporary Jewish tradition, not from an apocryphal Book of Abraham.

Gee’s second proposed evidence of “An Egyptian View of Abraham” is even less defensible.¹² The text that Gee presents is a Sahidic Coptic panegyric praising a Christian saint, copied in the twelfth century or somewhat earlier. The text is found in three copies (Clarendon Press fragment 65, British Museum Or. 3581B, and Zoega Borgia fragment ccxxii), and a combined scholarly edition was published by E. O. Winstedt in 1908.¹³ The Christian tale recounts the attempted martyrdom of *a saint, but not necessarily the patriarch*, Abraham, who is cast into a fiery furnace. As Winstedt discusses over two pages—in careful analysis that Gee intentionally fails to note—if this Abraham were the patriarch, then the story presented is based on a legend recognized to be of *Persian* origin: “the tradition that Abraham was cast into a fiery furnace by Nimrod.”¹⁴ Both Winstedt and the great Coptic scholar W. E. Crum, however, showed that the more likely identification is with the Persian-era martyr Abraham, bishop of Arbela (modern Irbil in Iraq), who was beheaded for his Christian faith ca. 348 under the Sasanian Persian ruler Shapur II. This identification is proved by the Coptic text itself:

“And when they cast Abraham into the fire, and the angel of the Lord came straightway to him and he saved him from the fire, it did not touch him at all. And his fame went forth in the whole land of Mesopotamia, because his God saved him from the fire of Sabor the king.”¹⁵

⁹ Betz, *ibid*, pp. 164 at n. 84 and 194 at n. 137.

¹⁰ Betz, *ibid*, p. 191.

¹¹ Betz, *ibid* p. 276. Further examples are gathered in Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1941, p. 212.

¹² John Gee, “An Egyptian View of Abraham,” in A. C. Skinner, D. M. Davis and C. Griffin, eds., *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, Provo: Maxwell Institute, 2011, pp. 137-156.

¹³ E. O. Winstedt, “Coptic Saints and Sinners,” *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, Vol. XXX, 1908, pp. 231-237 and 276-283. The date is discussed on p. 232.

¹⁴ Winstedt, *ibid*, pp. 232-233, cited quotation on p. 232.

¹⁵ My translation, cf. Winstedt, *ibid*, pp. 234-235 (text) and 279 (translation).

The Coptic text is not an original Egyptian story but based on Greek and written after the Arabic conquest. Greek transcribes “sh” as simple “s” and, under Arabic influence, later Egyptian Coptic substitutes “b” for “p” (as in modern Bebsi for Pepsi), so that when the Coptic translation was written the name “Shapur” would easily become “Sabor” as has been widely recognized. The fact that the martyr’s fame spread “in the whole land of Mesopotamia” specifically excludes a possible martyrdom in Egypt, and Gee concedes “it is not clear that the Pharaoh in the text was king over Egypt. He has normally been equated with one of many Persian kings named Shapur.”¹⁶

The identification with Shapur (II) is even clearer when one knows that the Coptic word Gee translates repeatedly as “Pharaoh” simply means “king” of any country, even though the word is etymologically derived from the ancient word “pharaoh.” Thus Gee’s anachronistic translation of the term as “Pharaoh” throughout the Coptic text is intentionally misleading, and the suggestion that “Pharaoh Sabor” might be a minor Egyptian ruler of Dynasty 14, known only from a single mention in the Turin king list, is phonetically impossible and stretches credulity.¹⁷ The Coptic encomium is an adapted tale from Sasanian Persia, not a native “Egyptian view,” and certainly not an *ancient* Egyptian view. Nor is the Abraham in question the patriarch, though the story does conflate differing Mesopotamian/Persian traditions for an attempted martyrdom *by fire in Mesopotamia* — not by knife in Egypt. Gee’s article is not honest in its title, its suppression of prior important scholarship, and its presentation of the principal actors. Gee never acknowledges that the Abraham of the text is not —or even that he might not be— the patriarch Abraham. The 1908 publication remains the only reliable edition of this Coptic text.

Finally, whether or not “the idolatrous god Elkenah” (of Abraham 1: 17 and Facsimile 1) can be conflated with the known Canaanite god El (see the LDS posting, n. 39), it is absolutely impossible to identify that god with the Egyptian canopic jar deity Qebhsenuf as Smith did in his explanation of Facsimile 1, Fig. 5. Far too often, the LDS approach has been to find individual minor identifications or remote possibilities that cannot in sum either explain or justify the Book of Abraham. The new LDS citations of sources that are of minor relevance, misleading or false does not advance the cause of the church and its disputed scripture.

The Lengthy Controversy

Scholarly rejection of the authenticity of the Book of Abraham is not new and has continued unabated since the study by Jules Remy and Théodule Devéria in 1861, with multiple scholars (including A. H. Sayce, Arthur Mace, Flinders Petrie, and James H. Breasted) dismissing the book’s validity in 1912. With the rediscovery of the papyri at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1967, analysis by John Wilson, Richard Parker and Klaus Baer (all 1968), and even the LDS apologist Hugh Nibley (in 1975) disproved any possibility that the Book of Abraham could be an acceptable translation of the

¹⁶ Gee, “An Egyptian View of Abraham,” p. 148.

¹⁷ Gee, *ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

surviving Egyptian papyri. My own works on the papyri (in 2002, 2003, 2011 and 2013) showed the same result, as did the LDS-sponsored translations by Michael Rhodes (2002) and the 2005 revision of Nibley's volume. Thus has arisen a host of alternative defenses for the Book of Abraham, questioning the meaning of the word "translation," the length of the original papyri, the possibility of a now-lost section with the Abraham text, etc.¹⁸ Many of these defensive positions are referenced in the new LDS church posting. However, clear links between the papyri and the published woodcut illustrations of the Book of Abraham are unmistakable, and the woodcuts contain explicit "explanations" by Joseph Smith,¹⁹ as even the new LDS position paper acknowledges: "Facsimile 1 contains a crocodile deity swimming in what *Joseph Smith* called 'the firmament over our heads' (emphasis added)." Smith also explained the images on the published "Facsimile 2," writing as follows: "The above *translation* is given as far as we have any right to give, at the present time" (emphasis added). The Book of Abraham itself is specifically subtitled "*translated* from the papyrus, by Joseph Smith" (again emphasis added).

In addition, Facsimile 1 is specifically referenced in the text of the Book of Abraham (1:12): "that you may have a knowledge of this altar, I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record." That initial representation is Fig. 4 of Facsimile 1: "The altar for sacrifice by the idolatrous priests, standing before the gods of Elkenah, Libnah, Mahmackrah, Korash, and the Pharaoh." Further links appear in Abraham 1:13-14, which describe the bedstead "altar" and foreign gods (actually canopic jars) in Facsimile 1, Figs. 5-9. From these clear internal references, the LDS church is wrong to question whether the vignette/ facsimile "and its adjacent text must be associated in meaning." It is simply unacceptable to argue, as the new LDS posting does, that Facsimile 1 may not be relevant since "it was not uncommon for ancient Egyptian vignettes to be placed some distance from their associated commentary." The Abraham text states clearly that the representation was not at some distance, but "at the commencement of this record." There is only one such representation included by Smith "at the commencement" of the Book of Abraham. If he actually knew what he was doing, surely he would have copied the correct illustration (which is keyed perfectly — and repeatedly— to the text).

There can be no reasonable dispute that Smith linked the image of Facsimile 1 to the Egyptian papyrus that he —in his own words— "translated." As the original papyrus of Facsimile 1 has survived and is in fact the "Breathing Permit" of an Egyptian priest Hôr, the Hôr papyrus is without question the text that Smith used for his translation that produced the Book of Abraham. The same conclusion is proved by Facsimile 3, a now-lost section of the same papyrus that contains the name of the priest Hôr, mistranslated by Joseph Smith as "Fig. 5. Shulem, one of the king's principal waiters, as represented by the characters above his hand." From Smith's words here, it is undeniable that he thought he was *translating* the Egyptian hieroglyphic characters in the normal meaning of the word "translate," just as one would translate Greek or Hebrew characters.

¹⁸ For the scholarly critiques and the varying LDS defenses, see Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition*, pp. 5-8 (2011 edition) = pp. 4-8 (2013 edition).

¹⁹ See Ritner, *ibid*, pp. 90-94 (2011 edition) = pp. 113-119 (2013 edition).

Since a literal meaning of Smith's words disproves the Book of Abraham, the desire of the LDS church to change Smith's clear meaning is understandable, but not believable. This is particularly true since there is surviving evidence of the translation process followed by Smith and the "scribes" to whom he dictated. These include the various copies by Smith, Oliver Cowdery and William W. Phelps of an attempted alphabet or grammar of the ancient Egyptian script (now frequently called Smith's "Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar") that is noted in the new LDS church web posting and is being edited by Brian Hauglid. In these documents, often garbled bits of Egyptian hieroglyphs or cursive hieratic script are copied in a left hand column and equated on the right with lengthy and quite impossible translations. Where it is possible to identify copied hieroglyphs, they again come from the Hôr papyrus (Fragment I, col. 3), the clear basis for Smith's work. It does not matter in whose hand the copies were made, since the work was under the direction of Smith, who alone claimed the rights of translation. Recall that the book was "translated from the papyrus, by Joseph Smith," not Cowdery or Phelps.

Despite the insistence of the new LDS position paper, it is not true that "Joseph Smith did not claim to know the ancient languages of the records that he was translating." In his 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. The supposed Egyptian, "Su-e-eh-ni (What other persons are those)" is gibberish.²⁰ Smith's claim to know Egyptian is noted even in the LDS web posting in a quote from Phelps on Smith being "uniquely capable of understanding the Egyptian characters" so that "he soon knew what they were."

The Translation Process— A "Smoking Gun"

Again in contrast to the new LDS statement, it is not true that "no eyewitness account of the translation survives." Smith's secretary Warren Parrish wrote in an 1838 letter in the *Painesville Republican*: "I have set (sic) by his side and penned down the Egyptian hieroglyphicks (sic) as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration from heaven."²¹ Smith's "divine inspiration" was not, however, divorced from a direct attempt to translate the characters of the Egyptian papyrus, as is clear from surviving manuscript pages of the evolving text of the Book of Abraham. These pages, unmentioned in the new LDS church posting, were published in 1966 in microfilm reproductions and in transcription by Jerald Tanner as *Joseph Smith's Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar*, Salt Lake City, Utah Lighthouse Ministry. These microfilm pages are the "smoking gun" evidence that resolves the history of the Book of Abraham translation process.

In his introduction to the volume, Tanner records that his Modern Microfilm Co. was contacted "in the early part of 1965" by a student at the Brigham Young University who

²⁰ See Ritner, *ibid*, p. 4 (2011 edition) = pp. 2-3 (2013 edition), refuting a suggestion by John Gee in 1992.

²¹ See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, New York, 1945 [second edition 1971], p. 171. This letter is cited in the new LDS church posting, n. 31.

had a typed copy of the “Egyptian Alphabet” hand copies, and that “later in the year another man loaned us a microfilm of the original document.” The microfilm reproductions found in the Tanner volume were printed from masters produced “in the early part of 1966,” the same year that the Tanner volume was published. The dates of 1965-1966 are significant, because the microfilm edition contains not only the “Egyptian Alphabet,” but the evolving manuscript pages for the future Book of Abraham as well. These pages contain copies of specific Egyptian text from the “Breathing Permit of Hôr,” column 2. That section of the papyrus was not reproduced in the Book of Abraham or any other publication until the rediscovery of the Smith papyri in New York in 1967 and the publication of sepia photographs in *The Improvement Era* in January and February of 1968. The copies made in 1965 and 1966, and the 1966 publication by Tanner, cannot then be forgeries since no forger could have had the unknown papyrus as a model to copy. The equation of the Book of Abraham and the “Breathing Permit of Hôr” is thus undeniable, and the source of Smith’s nineteenth century composition is settled. Period.

The Tanner volume that first published these manuscripts is cumbersome to use as it lacks running pagination, but relevant manuscript pages are lettered J through M, with a second series labeled out of order S, R, Q, N, P and O. Exactly like the “Alphabet and Grammar,” the pages include copies of Egyptian script on the left corresponding to lengthy English on the right. But in these texts, the English is the text of the Book of Abraham as it was being modified and would be published, with obvious deletions and revisions in the handwritten English text. Also unlike the “Alphabet and Grammar” hand copies, the Egyptian script on most of these sheets is immediately clear and readily translated by modern Egyptologists. Without question, the translation efforts by Smith and his “scribes” were based directly on Smith’s Egyptian papyri.

The manuscript pages are now summarized by H. Michael Marquardt in his valuable contribution to my volume on the papyri.²² Marquardt identifies three 1835 translation manuscripts, that together contain the text of Abraham 1:1-2:18. The series J through M corresponds to Manuscript 2 (Abraham 1:4-2:6), copied in Frederick Williams’ handwriting. Manuscript 3, copied in Parrish’s handwriting, corresponds to Abraham 1:4 (“I sought for mine appointment . . .”) to the end of 2:2 (“... the daughter of Haran.”). As mentioned above, both of these manuscripts can be found easily in the 1966 Tanner publication. The two manuscripts copy the same Egyptian signs for the same English text, with pages J and R being duplicates, as are pages K and Q, L and N, M and O. Pages S and P alone have indistinct Egyptian copies. The first hand copy of page P is probably the same Egyptian group copied first on pages M and O. In all cases, the Egyptian hand copies by Parrish (S, R, Q, N, P and O) are better (more legible) than those of Williams. It is the Parrish copies that are the focus of my remaining discussion. Ultimately, however, it does not matter in whose handwriting the pages are copied, since Smith alone controlled the translation process —as Parrish noted in his 1838 letter.

²² H. Michael Marquardt, “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papers: A History,” in Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition*, pp. 23-25 (2011 edition) = pp. 26-28 (2013 edition).

The identity of the underlying Egyptian text is particularly clear in the series Q, N and O, and these are discussed in detail below. The Egyptian copies are so clear that they can be recognized easily by laymen with no knowledge of Egyptian scripts. The copied Egyptian text on these pages is unmistakable.

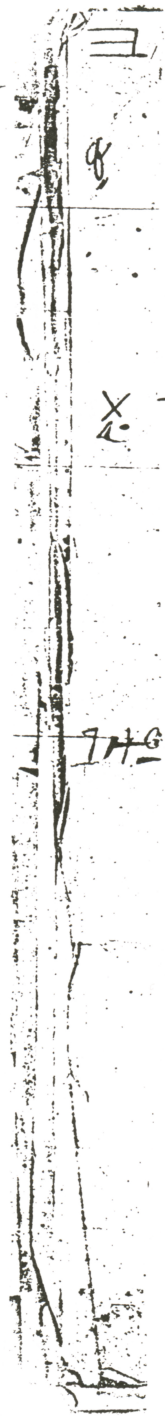
Page Q in both microfilm and transcription follows, corresponding directly to the Book of Abraham 1: 13-18. Those pages are followed by identifications of the copied Egyptian within the Joseph Smith papyrus corpus. Not surprisingly, all of the Egyptian signs are taken from the Breathing Permit of Hôr, exactly as one would suspect from Facsimiles 1 and 3 and the internal references within the Book of Abraham to the Facsimiles as noted above. The inspiration and basis for the text of the Book of Abraham is P. JS 1.2 (= Fragment XI) from the Breathing Permit of Hôr, the second column.²³ This papyrus column immediately follows the admitted source of Facsimile 1, confirming the explicit link between the text of the Book of Abraham and the adjacent “representation at the commencement of this record” (Abraham 1:12). No “lost papyrus” was used in the composition of the Book of Abraham.

²³ See Plate V = pp. 99-101 of Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition*, 2011 = Plate V and pp. 125-127 (2013 edition).

E
q
X
A
I
H
G

3
 It was made after the form of a man, even
 even as was made among the Chaldeans and
 it stood before the Gods of Urukina, Urukina
 Man-machran and also a god of Egypt that
 of Pharaoh King of Egypt, that you may
 have an understanding of their Gods.
 I have given you the fashion of them,
 in the figures at the beginning, which
 manners of figures were called by the
 names Chaldean, Urukina, and Egyptian.
 And as now I will give you a vision
 upon me, that the spirit of God shall
 and I shall see the spirit of God upon
 my face, as the spirit of God and
 the Lord-messenger and I shall see
 the spirit of God upon a man of the Urukina
 and the angel of his presence shall be
 in my face, and immediately shall I
 be taken up into the air.
 And the spirit of God was with me, and I
 saw the spirit of God upon a man of the Urukina
 and I have heard me, and have seen
 down to the earth, and to take the
 man from the gates of Urukina, and from all the
 cities of Urukina, into a strange land, which
 I have seen and not of Urukina, and this because
 the people of Urukina have turned
 their backs down from me, to worship
 the God of Urukina, and the God of Urukina
 and the God of Man-machran and the God
 of Pharaoh King of Egypt, therefore I have
 come down to take them and to cast them
 into the sea, I will cast up your hands against the
 Urukina, and I will take away the eyes of Urukina
 and I will take them by the hand, and I
 will take them, but I will put upon them my name
 even the presence of my Father, and I will

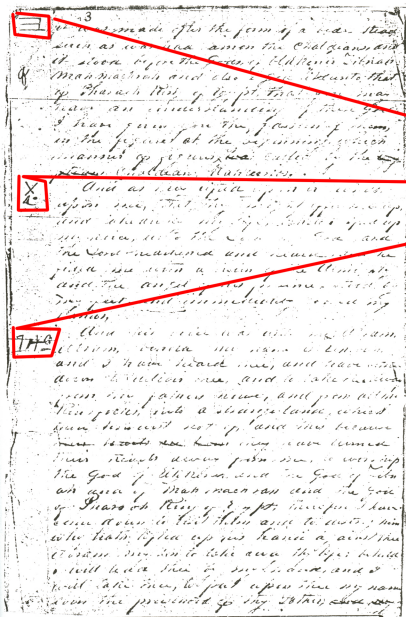
A photograph of page q of the "Book of Abraham" manuscript. This portion is found in the Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 1:13-18.



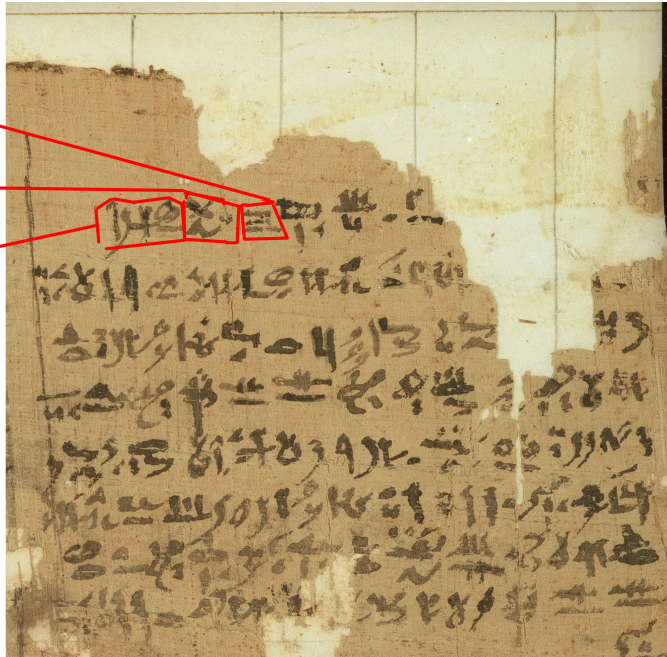
it was made after the form of a bed stead
 such as was had amon^g the Chaldeans, and
 it stood before the Gods of Elk Kener Libnah
 Mahmachrah and also a god like unto that
 of Pharaoh King of Egypt, that you may
 have an understanding of these gods
 I have given you the fassion of them,
 in the figures at the beginning, which
 manner of figures is ~~wa-~~ called by the Egy-
~~ptians-~~ Chaldeans Rahleenos.

And as they lifted up their hands
 upon me that they might offer me up,
 and take away my life, behold I lifted up
 my voice unto the Lord my God and
 the Lord hearkened and heard, and he
 filled me with a vision of the Almighty
 and the angel of his presence stood by
 my feet and immediately loosed my
 bands.

And his voice was unto me Abram,
 Abram, behold my name is Jehovah,
 and I have heard thee, and have come
 down to deliver thee, and to take thee away
 from thy fathers house, and from all thy
 Kinsfolks, into a strange land, which
 thou knowest not of, and this because
~~their hearts are turn-~~ they have turned
 their hearts away from me, to worship
 the god of Elk Kener, and the god of Libn
 ah and of Mah mach rah and the god
 of Pharaoh King of Egypt; therefore I have
 come down to visit them and to destroy him
 who hath lifted up his hand against thee
 Abram my son to take away thy life; behold
 I will lead thee by my hand, and I
 will take thee, to put upon thee my name
 even the priesthood of thy Father, ~~and my-~~



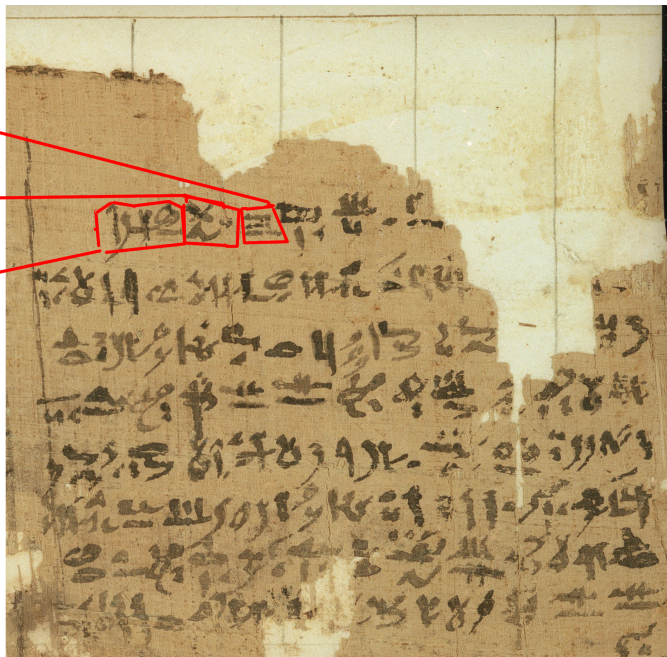
A photograph of page 9 of the "Book of Abraham" manuscript. This portion is found in the Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 1:1-18.



9 3
 It was made after the form of a bedstead
 such as was had among the Chaldeans, and
 it stood before the Gods of Elk Kener Libnah
 Mahanah, and also a god like unto that
 of Pharaoh King of Egypt, and 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 we called by the Egy-
 ptians Chaldeans Rahlencos.

And as they lifted up their hands
 upon me that they might offer me up,
 and take away my life, behold I lifted up
 my voice unto the Lord my God and
 the Lord hearkened and heard, and he
 filled me with a vision of his similitude
 and the face of his presence stood by
 my feet and immediately loosed my
 bands.

And his voice was unto me Abram,
 Abram, behold my name is Jehovah,
 and I have heard thee, and have come
 down to deliver thee, and to take thee away
 from thy fathers house, and from all thy
 kindreds, into a strange land, which
 thou knowest not of, and this because
 their hearts are turned - they have turned
 their hearts away from me, to worship
 the god of Elk Kener, and the god of Lib-
 nah and of Mah maen rah and the god
 of Pharaoh King of Egypt; therefore I have
 come down to visit them and to destroy him
 who hath lifted up his hand against thee
 Abram my son to take away thy life; behold
 I will lead thee by my hand, and I
 will take thee, to put upon thee my name
 even the priesthood of thy Father, and thy



The selected Egyptian text from column 2, line 1 begins with the end (the determinative) of the word for “lake,” and actually reads: [š]y wr Hnsw “[the] great l[a]ke of Khonsu.” This is the translation accepted not only by me but by all Egyptologists and recent Mormon translators as well.²⁴

²⁴ For the essentially unanimous readings and translations by Ritner (2002), Baer (1968), Parker (1968), Gee, Rhodes and Nibley (2005), Rhodes (2002), and Nibley (1975), see

Here follow the microfilm and transcription of page N, containing Book of Abraham 1: 26-31, and the corresponding Egyptian signs from P. JS 1.2, line 2.

75)

that order established by the fathers in
the first generations, in the days of the
just patriarchs, upon the coming of the
son of Adam, and also Noah his father,
who was the one who blessed him, with the
blessings of the earth, and with the best
wisdom, but cursed him as person
in the punishment.

At

the time of the birth of my lineage, I, who
in it could not have the best of wisdom,
not understanding the Pharaohs, did a sin
claim it, from the time of Adam,
therefore my father was led away, by the
advice of the Pharaohs, and he began
to abhor the church, and many laid
many eyes on the beginning of the crea-
tion, for the world had come into my
mind, and I came into the present
time.

2962

Now after the priest of all things was
written that he did there come a full
judgment of these things, which were spoken
unto me, concerning the land of Chalde-
a, that there should be a famine in
the land, and accordingly a famine
prevalent throughout all the land of
Chaldea, and my father was sorely
troubled, because of the famine,
and he repented of the evil which
he had determined against me,
to take away my life, but the records
of the fathers, even the patriarchs, con-
firming the right of my father, the Lord
my God, preserved in mine ambas-
sies, therefore a knowledge of the begin-
ning of creation, and also of the planets
and of the stars, as it was made known

A photograph of page n of the "Book of Abraham" manuscript. This portion is found in the Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 1:26-31.

5)

that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign even in the reign of Adam; and also Noah his father, ~~for as his days~~ who blessed him with the blessings of the earth and with the blessings of wisdom but cursed him as pertaining to the priesthood.

At. Now Pharaoh being of that lineage, by which he could not have the right of priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would feign claim it from Noah through Ham, therefore my father was led away, by their Idolitry but I shall endeavor here after to delineate the chronology run[ing] back from myself to the beginning of the creation: for the records have come into my hands which I hold unto this present time.

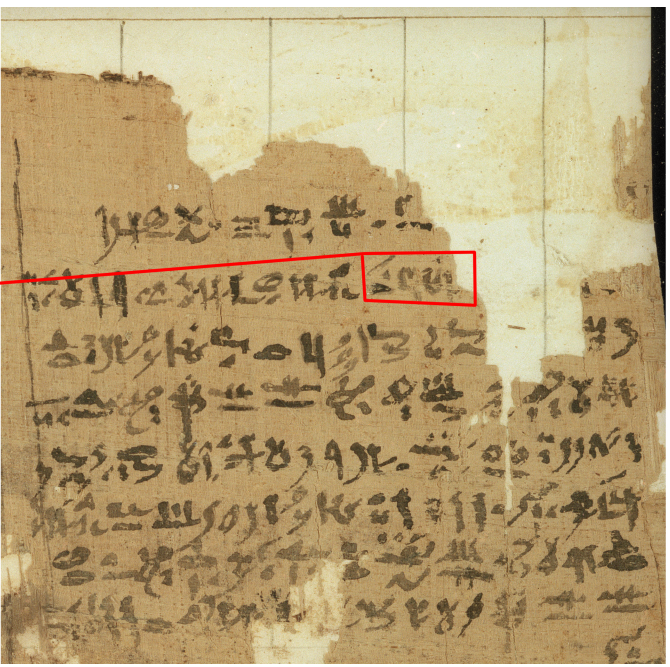
2962 Now after the priest of Elk Kiner was smitten that he died there came a fulfillment of those things which were spoke[n] unto me concerning the land of Chaldaea, that there should be a famine in the land, and accordingly a famine prevailed throughout all the land of Chaldea, and my father was sorely tormented, because of the famine, and he repented of the evil which he had determined against me, to take away my life, but the records of the fathers, even the patraarch's, concerning the right of priesthood the Lord my God preserved in mine own hands, therefore a Knowledge of the beginning of creation, and also of the planets and of the stars, as it was made know[n]

75) that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign even in the reign of Adam; and also Noah his father, for as his deity who blessed him with the blessings of the earth and with the blessings of wisdom but cursed him as pertaining to the priesthood.

Now Pharaoh being of that lineage, by which he could not have the right of priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would feign claim it from Noah through Ham, therefore my father was led away, by their idolatry but I shall endeavor here after to delineate the chronology running back from myself to the beginning of the creation; for the records have come into mine hands which I hold unto this present time.

Now after the priest of Elk Kiner was smitten that he died there came a fulfillment of those things which were spoken unto me concerning the land of Chaldaea, that there should be a famine in the land, and accordingly a famine prevailed throughout all the land of Chaldaea, and my father was sorely tormented, because of the famine, and he repented of the evil which he had determined against me, to take away my life, but the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs', concerning the right of priesthood the Lord my God preserved in mine own hands, therefore a Knowledge of the beginning of creation, and also of the planets and of the stars, as it was made known

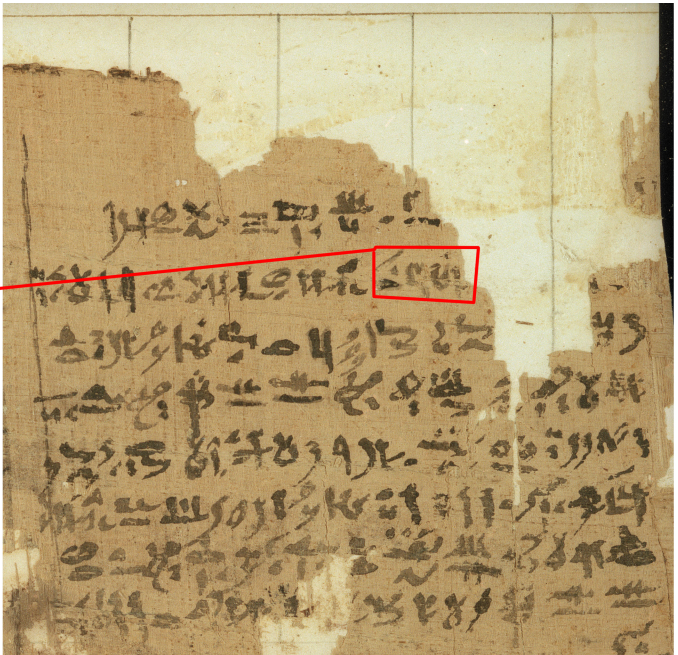
A photograph of page n of the "Book of Abraham" manuscript. This portion is found in the Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 1:28-31.



5) that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign even in the reign of Adam; and also Noah his father, for as his deity who blessed him with the blessings of the earth and with the blessings of wisdom but cursed him as pertaining to the priesthood.

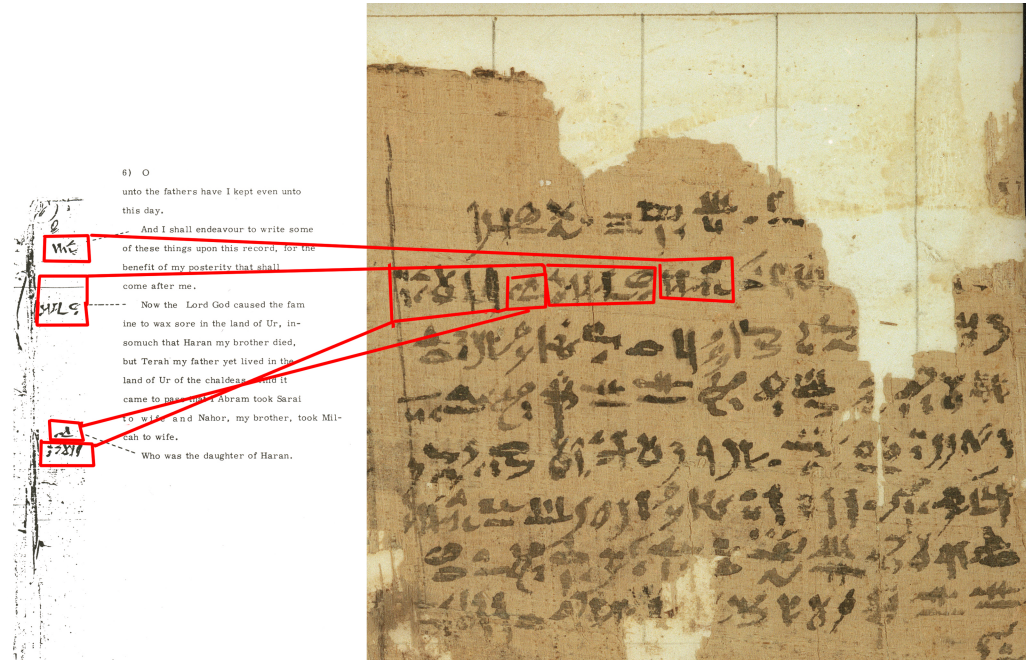
Now Pharaoh being of that lineage, by which he could not have the right of priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would feign claim it from Noah through Ham, therefore my father was led away, by their idolatry but I shall endeavor here after to delineate the chronology running back from myself to the beginning of the creation; for the records have come into mine hands which I hold unto this present time.

Now after the priest of Elk Kiner was smitten that he died there came a fulfillment of those things which were spoken unto me concerning the land of Chaldaea, that there should be a famine in the land, and accordingly a famine prevailed throughout all the land of Chaldaea, and my father was sorely tormented, because of the famine, and he repented of the evil which he had determined against me, to take away my life, but the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs', concerning the right of priesthood the Lord my God preserved in mine own hands, therefore a Knowledge of the beginning of creation, and also of the planets and of the stars, as it was made known



The identified signs represent the words ms n “born of.” The upper hand copy, not linked to a surviving portion of the papyrus, corresponds to a now-lost fragment preserving traces of “the Osiris Hôr, the justified.” The initial strokes of the word “Osiris” still survive on the papyrus as sight ink traces at the beginning (right edge) of this broken line. On the lower hand copy at the right edge, the small diagonal line that intersects the vertical stroke of ms “to be born” is the trailing ink flourish from the end of the word “voice” in the expression “true of voice” = “justified,” as written often in this papyrus (cf. P. JS 1.2, column 3, line 3, in the Breathing Permit Paragraph I).

The transcription for the concluding page O of Parrish's hand copy follows. The English text corresponds to Book of Abraham 1:36 through 2:2, while the Egyptian signs continue those copied on p. N, and are taken from P. JS 1.2, the remaining signs of line 2.



The four groups of Egyptian signs copied on page O mistakenly divide the name of Hôr's mother Taikhibit (T̄y-ḥy-by.t) into three different sections, while incorrectly joining as a single group the terms "true of voice" (= "justified") and "likewise." Group 1 is actually T̄y, group 2 is ḥy-by.t, and the small group 3 is the seated woman determinative that concludes the name of Taikhibit. Group 4 contains the signs for the phrase m̄c-ḥrw "true of voice" and for the word mit.t "likewise." The genuine translation of these signs continues the filiation of the priest Hôr, who was born of "Taikhibit, the justified," and, in parallel to the god Osiris, was to be towed to the lake of Khonsu "likewise."²⁵

The copied Egyptian thus continues directly from pages N to O, with no new Egyptian signs available for the intervening English translation on page P. The same problem exists for page S of the comparable Manuscript 2. However, as noted above, page P seems to repeat the same initial Egyptian sign as page O (T̄y), so that Smith and his scribes apparently "read" the same Egyptian line twice.

It is now evident that over half of the text of the Book of Abraham was invented by Smith from only two incomplete lines in the "Breathing Permit of Hôr" (P. JS 1, col. 2 [= Fragment XI], lines 1-2). The few Egyptian words "great lake of Khonsu, [and the Osiris

²⁵ For the comparable readings and translations of these words, see again Ritner, *ibid*, pp. 99-104 (2011 edition) = pp. 125-131 (2013 edition).

Hôr, the justified] born of Taikhibit, the justified, likewise” were spun into the full Book of Abraham 1:4-2:2.

It is not surprising that Smith’s translation of just a few Egyptian words could become a lengthy narrative. Before the 1822 decipherment of hieroglyphs by Jean-François Champollion in France, it had been wrongly assumed that the Egyptian writing system was purely symbolic, not phonetic. Champollion’s discovery would not have been known to Smith in America, and when he finally did have the chance to interact with an Egyptologist from Europe, it was the discredited Gustaf Seyffarth, who denied Champollion’s discovery.²⁶ Smith’s fanciful translation can be compared with the infamous example by Athanasius Kircher, who translated the small Santa Maria sopra Minerva obelisk in Rome in 1666 as:

Hemphta the supreme spirit and archetype infuses its virtue and gifts

in the soul of the sidereal world, that is the solar spirit subject to it

whence comes the vital motion in the material or elemental world, and an abundance of all things and variety of species arises.

From the fruitfulness of the Osirian bowl, in which, drawn by some marvelous sympathy, it flows ceaselessly, strong in power hidden in its two-faced self.

The all-seeing Chenosiris, guard of the sacred channels which are the humid nature in which the life of all things consists.

Ophionius the good demon for he obtaining of whose favors

And the propagation of life this sacred tablet is consecrated; by whose good will, and with the assistance of the humid Agathodaemon of divine Osiris, the seven towers of the heavens (the fortress of the planets) are protected from all harm.²⁷

Kircher’s “translation” continues for another four paragraphs, but the obelisk text actually contains just four variants of the royal titles of Pharaoh Apries of Dynasty 26:

The Golden Horus: Enduring of heart, the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, The Two Ladies: Lord of the strong arm, Apries, beloved of Atum, foremost of Sais, given life like Re forever.”

²⁶ See Ritner, *ibid*, p. 87 (2011 edition) = pp. 109-110 (2013 edition).

²⁷ Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1979, p. 62, figure no. 51.

It is to this symbolic tradition invoking spirits, astronomy and sacred tablets that the prolix translation of Joseph Smith belongs.

It must be stressed again that the real translation of the Egyptian signs discussed above is acknowledged in editions of the papyri not only by Egyptologists but by Mormon authors as well (Nibley, Rhodes and Gee). To be clear, since the Book of Abraham *is now proved to be based on the surviving Hôr papyrus*, LDS church-sponsored editions of that text effectively disprove the validity of the Book of Abraham. Here then is final evidence that Joseph Smith created the Book of Abraham by guesswork translation—in the usual sense—from the signs on the Egyptian papyri that he owned. The specific source of the Book of Abraham is the “Breathing Permit of Hôr,” misunderstood and mistranslated by Joseph Smith. The only truly ancient sources in the Book of Abraham are the many reworked Hebrew passages from Genesis, as outlined explicitly by H. Michael Marquardt.²⁸

Going Forward

With the Book of Abraham now confirmed as a perhaps well-meaning, but erroneous invention by Joseph Smith, the LDS church may well devote some reflection to the status of the text. The former Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, since 2001 renamed the Community of Christ, avoids this issue by treating the Book of Abraham as speculative writing by Smith, not as a document of historical truth. In this decision they are clearly correct. Despite its inauthenticity as a genuine historical narrative, the Book of Abraham remains a valuable witness to *early American* religious history and to the recourse to ancient texts as sources of modern religious faith and speculation. The book still has its uses and significance, but not for the ancient world of Egypt and Abraham.

²⁸ H. Michael Marquardt, “Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papers: A History,” in Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition*, pp. p. 32-44 (2011 edition) = pp. 36-52 (2013 edition).