

## Why doesn't the translation of the Egyptian papyri found in 1967 match the text of the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price?

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The papyri in question are a part of the collection of Egyptian mummies and papyri that the Prophet Joseph Smith bought from Michael Chandler in 1835. After the Prophet's death, the papyri were lost to the Church. But in 1966, Dr. Aziz S. Atiya, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Utah, discovered some twenty-two separate papyri fragments in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, which were clearly part of Joseph Smith's original collection. The papyri were acquired by the Church, and they are now located at Brigham Young University.

Perhaps the most famous of these papyri fragments is the one depicted in the book of Abraham as facsimile number one. It is said to represent Abraham being sacrificed on an altar by the priest of Elkenah. This picture can be connected with several of the other papyri fragments that relate to the text of an ancient Egyptian religious document known as the "Book of Sensen" or "Book of Breathings." Abraham refers to a picture in the text of the book of Abraham (Abr. 1:12), and this picture is presumed to be the one we call facsimile one; therefore, some people have concluded that this Book of Breathings must be the text Joseph Smith used in his translation of the book of Abraham.

However, there are some serious problems associated with this assumption. First of all, from paleographic and historical considerations, the Book of Breathings papyrus can reliably be dated to around A.D. 60—much too late for Abraham to have written it. Of course, it could be a copy—or a copy of a copy—of the original written by Abraham. However, a second problem arises when one compares the text of the book of Abraham with a translation of the Book of Breathings; they clearly are not the same. Enemies of the Church have noted this and, without considering any other facts, have assumed that this proves the Prophet's translation to be a hoax.

Actually, there are two possible explanations why the text of the recently discovered papyri does not match the text in the Pearl of Great Price.

One explanation is that it may have been taken from a *different* portion of the papyrus rolls in Joseph Smith's possession. In other words, we don't have all the papyri Joseph Smith had—and what we do have is obviously not the text of the book of Abraham. The Prophet described the papyrus he used in translation in

these words: "The record ... found with the mummies, is beautifully written on papyrus, with black, and a small part red, ink or paint, in perfect preservation." (*History of the Church*, 2:348.) The Book of Breathings papyrus has no writing in red ink and is in an extremely poor state of preservation. It must have been in much the same condition in Joseph Smith's day when fragments of it were glued haphazardly to other totally unrelated papyri. In fact, part of the outer border of facsimile two in the book of Abraham has some of these unrelated fragments inserted in it.

Although the picture found as facsimile one in the book of Abraham stands at the beginning of the Book of Breathings, this does not necessarily mean that it belongs to the text. The Egyptians often placed vignettes next to texts that bore no relationship to them. J. C. Goyon, in his study of the Louvre papyrus number 3279 (a Book of Breathings text, incidentally), says that the vignettes of religious papyri often have only a very distant connection with the subject of the accompanying text. (*Bibliothèque D'Etude*, Vol. XLII, "Le Papyrus du Louvre N. 3279," Cairo, 1966, p. 2.) Edouard Naville, in his invaluable publication of the Theban version of the Book of the Dead, also notes that the vignettes of many Book of the Dead papyri have absolutely nothing to do with the text they accompany and are clearly not meant to illustrate that text. (*Das Aegyptische Totenbuch der XVIII, bis XX, Dynastie, Einleitung*, Berlin, 1886, p. 39.) Thus, the text that gave rise to the book of Abraham could have been located elsewhere on the same papyrus or even on another.

But if the text were on the same papyri, what is a text written by—or attributed to—Abraham doing with a bunch of pagan religious texts some two thousand years after his time? This is really not as unlikely as it may seem. The Egyptians had a mania for things of the past. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Abraham's ancient record could have been copied many times through the generations and treasured for its antiquity centuries later. Perhaps it was just such a multigeneration copy that finally ended up with the mummies and documents that came into Michael Chandler's possession, a text that we do not now have.

A second explanation takes into consideration what Joseph Smith meant by the word *translation*. While translating the Book of Mormon, he used the Urim and Thummim rather than dictionaries and grammars of the language. Translating with the Urim and Thummim is evidently a much different process than using the tools of scholarly research.

Section seven of the Doctrine and Covenants provides us with a good example of that process. It is a revelation given to the Prophet through the Urim and Thummim of a translation of a "record made on parchment by John [the Revelator] and hidden up by himself." (See section heading to D&C 7.) In other words, the document being translated wasn't even in the Prophet's possession; yet by means of the Urim and Thummim he was able to translate it.

His translation of the Bible, parts of which are in the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price, was also done without having the original text before him. Instead, while he was using the King James Version of the Bible, the correct meaning or

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We can envision a possible similar process taking place in Joseph Smith's translation of the papyri he got from Michael Chandler. Instead of making a literal *translation*, as scholars would use the term, he used the Urim and Thummim as a means of receiving revelation. Even though a copy of Abraham's record possibly passed through the hands of many scribes and had become editorially corrupted to the point where it may have had little resemblance to the original, the Prophet—with the Urim and Thummim, or simply through revelation—could have obtained the translation—or, as Joseph Smith used the word, he could have received the *meaning*, or *subject-matter content* of the original text, as he did in his translation of the Bible. This explanation would mean that Joseph Smith received the text of our present book of Abraham the same way he received the translation of the parchment of John the Revelator—he did not even need the actual text in front of him.

In reality, the actual method Joseph Smith used is far less important than the resulting book of scripture he produced. But here the Prophet's critics prefer to ignore the evidence of the text itself. The book of Abraham should be evaluated on the basis of what it claims to be: a record of Abraham. A wealth of material on Abraham has come to light since the Prophet's text was published, and the book of Abraham compares *astoundingly well with these documents*. (Hugh Nibley has discussed in detail the correlations between the book of Abraham and the subsequently discovered texts on Abraham. See *Abraham in Egypt*, 1981, and *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, An Egyptian Endowment*, 1975, both published by Deseret Book Company.)

In the final analysis, however, the proof of the truth of the book of Abraham does not come by human means. As with all aspects of the restored gospel, "by the power of the Holy Ghost [we] may know the truth of all things." (Moro. 10:5.) I have studied the book of Abraham, and the truth of it has been made known to me in a way I can't deny. I know that anyone who earnestly wants to know if the book of Abraham is true can also receive this same witness and knowledge from God.