

# The Meaning of The Kirtland Egyptian Papers

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## INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE IS THE BEST KIND

Filed together in a gray cardboard box in the Church Historian's Office is a strange batch of early Church papers, all in the handwriting of men associated with Joseph Smith in Kirtland in 1837, and all classified for one reason or another as "Egyptian." We shall therefore call them "the Kirtland Egyptian Papers."\*\*Along with a number of odds and ends are two impressive documents, one a bound manuscript commonly and falsely designated as "Joseph Smith's Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar," and the other what appears to be a translation of the first chapter of the Book of Abraham from a number of accompanying hieratic symbols. A photographic record of some of these documents was made on a single film strip by the Historian's Office some years ago, but nothing was put on the strip to indicate the nature, number, or relationship of the various items included. So when the film was purloined, reproduced without permission, and copies sold in Salt Lake City in 1966, the publishers had no means of knowing what they were dealing with, but joyfully accepted the signature of Joseph Smith on one piece of paper as proof that the whole batch was his own handiwork. The public was only too glad to go along with the ruse, which went unchallenged by the Mormons, who had unconsciously laid the foundation of a massive misunderstanding many years before.

When a bound manuscript captioned "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language" was turned up in the Church Historian's Office in February 1935, the finders were under-

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\*\*Book of Abraham and Egyptian Manuscripts  
in the Church Historian's Office,  
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Egyptian manuscripts:

Egyptian Mss. #1, ca. 1837. 1 vol. 31 x 20 cm. Ms.

Manuscript entitled "Grammar & alphabet [sic] of the Egyptian language," in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps and Warren Parrish.

Egyptian Mss. #2, ca. 1837. 2l. 33 x 20 cm. Ms.

Manuscript entitled "Egyptian counting," in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps. Characters with English explanations.

Egyptian Mss. #3, ca. 1837. 4l. 32 x 20 cm. Ms.

Manuscript entitled "Egyptian alphabet," in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps.

Egyptian Mss. #4, ca. 1837. 9l. 33 x 20 cm. Ms.

Manuscript entitled "Egyptian alphabet," in the handwriting of Joseph Smith.

Egyptian Mss. #5, ca. 1837. 4l. various sizes. Ms.

Manuscript in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. Top has deteriorated, similarity to Mss. 4 and 5 indicates it was probably titled "Egyptian alphabet."

Egyptian Mss. #6, ca. 1837. 1 vol. 20 x 13 cm. Ms.

Titled "Valuable discovery of hidden [sic] records . . . in the handwriting of Joseph Smith. English contents are in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery.

Egyptian Mss. #7, ca. 1837. 1 vol. 20 x 16 cm. Ms.

English contents in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. Back cover has "F.G.W." and "William" on it.

Egyptian Mss. #8, ca. 1837. 1l. (1 fold.) 32 x 40 cm. Ms.

Egyptian characters and hieroglyphs.

Egyptian Mss. #9, ca. 1837. 1l. 39 x 19 cm. Ms.

Characters by unknown person.

Egyptian Papyri #10, n.d. 1l. 33 x 20 cm. Ms.

Egyptian Papyrus attached to a sheet of paper.

Book of Abraham manuscripts:

Manuscript #1, ca. 1837. 10p. 32 x 20 cm. Ms.

Translation of the Book of Abraham, 1:1 to 2:18 in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps and Warren Parrish. Obtained from Wilford Wood.

Manuscript #2, ca. 1837. 4p. 33 x 19 cm. Ms.

Book of Abraham, 1:4 to 2:6 in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps.

Manuscript #3, ca. 1837. 6p. 32 x 19 cm. Ms.

Book of Abraham, 1:4 to 2:2 in the handwriting of Warren Parrish.

Manuscript #4, 1841. 18l. 29 x 20 cm. Ms.

Book of Abraham, 1:1 to 3:26 in the handwriting of Willard Richards.

Facsimile no. 2, ca. 1841. 4p. various sizes. Ms.

Includes explanations in the handwriting of Willard Richards.

A Fac-simile from the Book of Abraham, no. 2, ca. 1843. Engraved by Ruben Hedlock. Broadside. 32 x 19 cm.

Facsimile from the Book of Abraham with explanation of the characters. On back is a letter, Aug. 1, 1843, to Clyde Williams & Co., Harrisburg, Pa., signed by Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps.



standably eager to claim the discovery of a major writing of Joseph Smith himself, and not only accepted the thing without question or examination as his work, but even went so far as to label it "Joseph Smith's Translation of Abraham's Alphabet and Grammar."<sup>1</sup> Small wonder that the parties who since 1966 have diligently exploited this document as a weapon against the Prophet have been only too happy to accept without further discussion and on the authority of the Mormons themselves the quite untested and untenable propositions (a) that Joseph Smith actually wrote the thing, and (b) that he also translated that other text (the first chapter and part of the second chapter of the Book of Abraham) from the Egyptian symbols that accompany it.

The three crucial documents upon which these false assumptions are based are (1) the one which has been misleadingly dubbed *Joseph Smith's Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar* (hereafter referred to as "A. & G."),<sup>2</sup> (2) two manuscripts of Abr. 1:4-2:5 (designated as "Book of Abraham Mss. #2 and #3" by the Historian's Office), and (3) a piece of paper ("Egyptian Ms. #6") bearing the signature of Joseph Smith, thus incriminating him as the author of everything. When in 1967 the original Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri became available and it was found that they contained some of the same characters as those accompanying the English texts of the above-mentioned "B. of A. Mss. #2 and #3," the "Fall of the Book of Abraham" was proclaimed with the usual orgiastic ecstasies of the *Salt Lake City Messenger*. Mr. Richard P. Howard of the Reorganized LDS Church then took up the theme in an article which through the offices of Mr. Wallace Turner and the *New York Times* (May 2, 1970) received national attention: ". . . . the discovery and publication in 1967, of fragments of the original papyri from which Joseph

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<sup>1</sup>James R. Clark, *The Story of the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), p. 156. Clark's suggestion (pp. 109f) that this may be a translation of a grammar written by Abraham meets with many objections, not the least of which is that the Prophet records in the "Joseph Smith 'Diary'" kept by Willard Richards, 1842-4, and still unpublished, under the date of "Wednesday Nov 15 1843. P. M. at the office suggested the Idea of preparing a grammar of the Egyptian language." From which it is plain that it was his idea. For this and other references to follow to unpublished materials in the Church Historian's Office we are beholden to the researches of Brother Dean Jessee, whose investigations into the various handwritings involved in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers are indispensable to any progress of understanding.

<sup>2</sup>Obtainable under the title of *Joseph Smith's* [sic] *Alphabet and Grammar*, from the Modern Microfilm Company in Salt Lake City. Published in 1906.



Smith produced the Book of Abraham . . . has given us the key to an authentic appraisal of the process by which the Book of Abraham was formulated by Joseph Smith."<sup>3</sup> It is assumed without question or examination that Joseph Smith "produced the Book of Abraham" from these very papyri—though Mr. Howard would be the first to insist that any such derivation is impossible. But what does that tell us of the "*process* by which the Book of Abraham was formulated"? For that we must go to "Joseph Smith's Original Alphabet and Grammar" where, according to Howard, even "a quick glance . . . discloses the *modus operandi* of Joseph Smith in determining its contents." He assures us that "all of the text from Abraham 1:4-2:18 has been verified as having originated in this way."<sup>4</sup> In *what* way? What is the "process," the *modus operandi* which Mr. Howard finds so obvious? If he knows so well how it was done, let him give us an independent translation of some of these texts using the same method: anyone undertaking such a salutary exercise will quickly change his mind and begin to ask himself, "Is this really the very text, is this the very Alphabet and Grammar, is this the very process?" And if he honestly wants an answer he will soon discover the fatal defect in these documents as evidence, namely that they are both random and fragmentary. There is a lot more to the story than they alone can tell us. Mr. Howard's unawareness shows impressively when as a clincher he points to an entry in the Joseph Smith History: "The remainder of this month I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Mormon, and arranging a grammar," which for Howard is "an indication of how and when he proceeded to do it."<sup>5</sup> But no matter how carefully one reads the passage, it tells us neither when, how, nor by whom the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were produced: the period referred to was only ten days in July 1835, while our papers were turned out years later; the Egyptian materials found in the A. & G. are, as we shall see, *not* those used in the purported translations labeled "B. of A. Mss. #2 and #3"; and where does Joseph Smith come into the picture? By persistent repetition of his name in every other line and in every context, and by strict avoidance of the names of the men who actually

<sup>3</sup>Richard P. Howard, "The 'Book of Abraham' in the Light of History and Egyptology," *Courage* (April, 1970), p. 38; cf. *New York Times*, May 2, 1970, and *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 5, 1970.

<sup>4</sup>Howard, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 37, quoting from *Millennial Star* 15 (May 7, 1853), p. 297.



wrote the documents it is an easy matter to stick Joseph Smith with the whole thing.

The trouble is that the stolen film was both an incomplete and an indiscriminating document, though repeated reference to it as "the original film" seeks to cover up these fatal defects. There is nothing in the film to show what the various documents included in it have to do with each other; where each begins and ends; how many there are; what the purpose of each is. Above all, these few items do not represent the whole collection of Kirtland Egyptian Documents: B. of A. Mss. #2 and #3, for example, are far less important than B. of A. Mss. #1 and #4 which are not included in the film, but which alone can tell us what Nos. 2 and 3 are about. It is the missing documents that make all the difference, and had the critics been honest they would have asked themselves from the first whether the odd and contradictory stuff that their hands fell into really told the whole story.

#### A STRANGE PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers are written in the handwriting of six men: W. W. Phelps, Frederick G. Williams, Warren Parrish, Oliver Cowdery, Willard Richards, and Joseph Smith.

The Richards text ("Bk. of Abr. Ms. #4") is dated 1841—the date is written on the back of it in the hand of Thomas Bullock—and contains no Egyptian characters. F. G. Williams's contribution is little more than a signature on the cover of "Eg. Ms. #6." This leaves Phelps, Cowdery, and Parrish as the key operators. Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps could have done their work between July 1835 (when the papyri reached Kirtland) and early 1838, when both men broke with the Prophet. It is Parrish, who worked closely with Phelps, who limits the time span: he became a scribe to the Prophet on January 21, 1836, and was dismissed in December 1837 when Joseph Smith discovered that he had been working against him; soon afterwards Parrish was excommunicated and never returned to the Church. This means that the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were produced no earlier than 1836 and no later than 1837. For all these matters the reader is referred to Dean Jessee's article in this issue of *BYU Studies*.

Joseph Smith first heard of the papyri on about July 1, 1835. After July 19, 1835, the Prophet, according to his journal,



spent "the remainder of the month . . . continually engaged in arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients."<sup>6</sup> On October 1, 1835, he "stayed at home and labored on the Egyptian Alphabet in company with his brethren O. Cowdery & W.W. Phelps. The system of astronomy was unfolded."<sup>7</sup> Then on Tuesday, November 17, 1835, he "exhibited the alphabet of the ancient Records to Mr. Holmes, and some others. Went with him to F. G. Williams to see the mummies."<sup>8</sup> There is no mention of his working on grammar or alphabet on the last day named; indeed, in the whole daily record of his activities only twelve days are mentioned on which he worked in those fields, and the work could hardly have been more than a preliminary speculation and blocking out of approaches. After the initial excitement, other concerns had priority, and a bare six weeks after the work had begun W. W. Phelps wrote to his wife: "Nothing has been doing in translation of the Egyptian record for a long time, and probably will not for some time to come."<sup>9</sup> In December of 1835 Oliver Cowdery wrote a long and enthusiastic article on the Egyptian papyri for the *Messenger and Advocate*, promising more to come. Yet the subject is never mentioned again in Church publications until 1842, even though articles continued to appear by the same brethren—Phelps, Cowdery, Parrish—on such subjects as "Ancient History—Egypt" (in two parts) and "An Account of Abraham."

Moreover, we nowhere find mention of Joseph Smith engaged in translating the Book of Abraham itself before October of 1840, when he reports that though the papyri had been "unrolled and preserved with great labor and care, my time has been hitherto too much taken up to translate the whole of them."<sup>10</sup> After five years the work had hardly got beyond the physical manipulation of the documents. By the end of 1837

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Smith History (classified as DHC Ms. B-1, p. 597, in the Church Historian's Office, 47 East South Temple St., Salt Lake City), in the hand of Willard Richards, written in 1843.

<sup>7</sup>Recorded in a number of sources: Joseph Smith's Diary (Sept. 22, 1835 to April 3, 1836, in the hand of Oliver Cowdery) under date of Oct. 1, 1835; Joseph Smith History (DHC Ms. B-1, p. 622); Joseph Smith History, 1835-6, p. 107 (numbering from the back of Vol. A-1, written at the time of entry, Oct. 1835, by Warren A. Cowdery, this being the source we have quoted).

<sup>8</sup>Joseph Smith History (DHC Ms. B-1), p. 654.

<sup>9</sup>W. D. Bowen, "The Versatile W. W. Phelps—Mormon Writer, Educator, and Pioneer" (M. A. Thesis, Brigham Young University, Aug. 1958), p. 68, dated Sept. 11, 1835.

<sup>10</sup>Clark, *Story of the Pearl of Great Price*, p. 112, quoting the *Quincy Whig*, Vol. 3, p. 1 (Oct. 17, 1840).



the chapter-and-a-half that appear in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers had been translated, but in November of that year the Prophet was still after "procuring means to translate and print the records taken from the Catacombs of Egypt."<sup>11</sup> Most of the work, that is, was still to be done long after the men who wrote the Kirtland Papers had left the Church, and none of it was published until 1842, five years later. Wilford Woodruff was thrilled when in February 1842 "Joseph the Seer . . . presented . . . some of the Book of Abraham" to a group of the saints. It was exciting news: "Joseph has had these records in his possession for several years but has never presented them before the world in the English language until now."<sup>12</sup> Ten days later the Prophet corrected Reuben Hedlock's engraving for the issue of the *Times and Seasons* appearing on March 15, 1842,<sup>13</sup> and on the following day read proof of "the commencement of the Book of Abraham."<sup>14</sup> Two days later he was again studying the original papyri with Hedlock "so that he might take the size of the several plates or cuts."<sup>15</sup> Then after three days he "recommenced translating from the Records of Abraham," and on the afternoon of the following day "continued the translation of the Book of Abraham," and after some Church business "continued translating and revising, and reading letters in the evening . . . ."<sup>16</sup> Thus we see that even the rare occasions on which he found time to translate were interrupted by business of various sorts. James R. Clark posits that "the five chapters or 13 pages of the Book of Abraham" were all turned out in the thirty days between February 19 and March 18, 1842; compared with the size of the Book of Mormon and its rate of production, this is quite a minor performance.<sup>17</sup> Clark suggests that "Joseph Smith had not until February of 1842 seriously undertaken the translation of the *texts* of the papyrus rolls, but had concentrated on Abraham's [sic] Alphabet and Grammar from 1835-1842."<sup>17</sup> But to say that he worked *only* on the grammar is not to say that he worked

<sup>11</sup>Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (2d ed. rev.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957), Vol. 2, pp. 520-521 [commonly called *Documentary History of the Church*; hereafter referred to as *DHC*].

<sup>12</sup>Clark, pp. 168f, quoting Wilford Woodruff Diary (Ms.), Feb. 19, 1842.

<sup>13</sup>*DHC* 4:519.

<sup>14</sup>*DHC* 4:542.

<sup>15</sup>*DHC* 4:543.

<sup>16</sup>*DHC* 4:548.

<sup>17</sup>Clark, pp. 173f.



long and hard on it; we know from his journal histories that he hardly got started on the project, and could devote very little time to it. A note written by Willard Richards at the dictation of the Prophet states: "Wednesday Nov 15 1843 . . . P.M. at the office suggested the Idea of preparing a grammer [sic] of the Egyptian language."<sup>18</sup> It is quite clear that any Egyptian grammar by Joseph Smith never got beyond the planning stage. The translation was never completed either, and in February of 1843 the editors of the *Times and Seasons* could announce, ". . . we have the promise of Br. Joseph, to furnish us with further extracts from the Book of Abraham."<sup>19</sup> Certainly translation had never had to wait on the completion or even the beginning of a grammar. In all, Brother Joseph spent barely ten days "arranging" a grammar, which along with his many other duties would allow him only time to line up a few ideas. Most significant, the only "Grammar" in the Kirtland Papers is only a page-and-a-half long, a work of no practical value whatever, and never employed in any translation.

#### SCRIPTURE OR STEPCCHILD?

Mr. Howard and the *Times* have informed the nation that "it may be helpful to suggest that the Book of Abraham represents simply the product of Joseph Smith Jr.'s imagination wrought out in the midst of what to him must have been a very crucial and demanding complex set of circumstances."<sup>20</sup> The Prophet is generously conceded the privilege of making a fool of himself in view of the severe pressure under which he was operating, the Book of Abraham being a sort of crash program undertaken in time of crisis. But this will never do. We have seen that the Prophet Joseph only worked on the Egyptian things when his time was not "too much taken up" with other things, i.e., when he was *not* working in a crisis; such happy times did not come often, but they were spread over a period of eight years, so that whether he worked intensively on the project or not, he had plenty of time to consider what he was doing. It was not a rushed and crowded project but one reserved for scattered periods of relative leisure: Joseph Smith never did anything more calmly and deliberately.

<sup>18</sup>See note 6.

<sup>19</sup>*Times and Seasons*, Feb. 1843, cit. Clark, p. 98.

<sup>20</sup>Howard, p. 45.



Even if the whole thing was done at Nauvoo in the Spring of 1842, the plan was conceived at the very beginning, in 1835, giving the Prophet years to think it over.

Again, Mr. Howard looks no farther than his own rhetoric for proof when he solemnly informs us that the Book of Abraham was not "any kind of 'inspired' translation, as the church has traditionally considered the Book of Mormon to have been," and applauds his church for "trying to divorce Joseph Smith from the ideas expressed in the Book of Abraham."<sup>21</sup> They will concede the Prophet's ability to deal with reformed Egyptian but place ordinary Egyptian hopelessly beyond his reach.

Yet from the very beginning the Book of Abraham was viewed and discussed by the Latter-day Saints as authentic scripture. As soon as the Prophet got possession of the papyri, W.W. Phelps wrote to his wife: "... the 'rolls of papyrus,' contained the sacred record kept of Joseph in Pharaoh's Court in Egypt, and the teachings of Father Abraham. God has so ordained it that these mummies and writings have been brought in the Church, and the sacred writing I had just locked up in Brother Joseph's house when your letter came." Moreover, these sacred records "will make a good witness for the Book of Mormon."<sup>22</sup> In the envelope with this letter, the Prophet Joseph enclosed his own kind and comforting note to Sister Phelps back at the farm in Missouri, promising her that her husband would in time be able to teach her "hidden things of old times," even "treasures hid in the sand" (citing Deut. 33:19).<sup>23</sup> On November 17, 1835, the Prophet reported that an inspection of the same documents left his visitor, Mr. Holmes, "strong in the faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>24</sup> In his long article in the *Messenger and Advocate* a month later, Oliver Cowdery hailed the documents as "an inestimable acquisition to our present scriptures."<sup>25</sup> The Prophet told another visitor, Josiah Quincy, according to the latter, that "these ancient records throw great light on the subject of Christianity," and though he never got around to demonstrating the point in detail, it is nonetheless

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 44-45.

<sup>22</sup>Leah Y. Phelps, "Letters of Faith from Kirtland," *Improvement Era* 45 (1942), p. 529. The letter is dated July 19, 1835.

<sup>23</sup>A photograph of this letter in the Prophet's hand accompanies the above article, n. 22.

<sup>24</sup>Joseph Smith History (DHC Ms. A-1), p. 134 numbering from the back of the book written at the time in the hand of Warren A. Cowdery; also in DHC Ms. B-1, p. 654, in the hand of Willard Richards, written in 1843.

<sup>25</sup>*Messenger and Advocate*, Dec. 1835, p. 236. Italics added.



true.<sup>26</sup> Years later Orson Pratt recalled that "the Lord told him [Joseph Smith] they were sacred records, containing inspired writings of Abraham . . ." <sup>27</sup> Indeed, how could writings of Abraham be considered anything but sacred? This "Book of Abraham," as it was always called, "that is to be presented to the inhabitants of the *Earth* in the *Last Days*," as Wilford Woodruff wrote just after a session with the Prophet Joseph,<sup>28</sup> can no more be dismissed as a secular aberration than its sponsoring as scripture can be denied to Joseph Smith, its principal enthusiast.

#### THE ALPHABET AND GRAMMAR (A. & G.)

We have seen that Joseph Smith as early as 1835 and as late as 1843 "suggested the idea of preparing a grammar of the Egyptian language," and made some preliminary exploratory motions. They could not have been more than that—there was too much else going on and, as the journal history shows, chances for serious work were few and far between. We also know that he worked "in company with his brethren" and sought their advice and help. Also we know from the letters and journals of all those men that they were strong-minded, independent, and (all but one) ambitious to shine as revelators and translators in their own right. So when a document like the so-called "Joseph Smith's Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar" comes into our hands, the first question to ask, before leaping to conclusions and inventing a title that is calculated and bound to cripple serious research, is "Just who produced this?" And right away we begin to notice a number of interesting things.

1. None of this is written by the hand of Joseph Smith, but it is all in the handwriting of William Wines Phelps, with the exception of five short appendages to certain sections written by the hand of Warren Parrish.

2. The A. & G. has no title page. It lies before us complete and undamaged in the original binding, but instead of a title page the writer did not even leave room for a title, so that the words "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language"

<sup>26</sup>Quincy Whig, Oct. 17, 1840, p. 1, cited in Clark, *Story of the Pearl of Great Price*, p. 112.

<sup>27</sup>O. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses* 20 (1878), p. 65.

<sup>28</sup>See note 12.



have to be awkwardly and unevenly crammed in at the top of the first page, as an afterthought when the page was completed. What makes this interesting is that Joseph Smith was a stickler for titles, as his publications will show.<sup>28a</sup> Indeed, the one proper title page among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers was penned by Joseph Smith himself. Why, then, does this most ambitious work have no title page if Smith wrote or dictated it?

3. Stranger still, Joseph Smith is nowhere designated as the author. He always took full responsibility for what he wrote or dictated, as when in taking over the editorship of the *Times and Seasons* he took pains to make clear just who was responsible for what.<sup>29</sup> All the scriptures even, revealed through him, bear his name conspicuously at their head. However reticent his disciples may have been, the Prophet knew that it was important to establish the authorship of any inspired writing.

4. The grammar and spelling throughout the book are very nearly perfect, which means that they are not Joseph Smith's. This book is in the hands of a literate writer, W.W. Phelps, the best-educated man in Kirtland. How much of it is his and how much Smith's remains to be seen and calls for investigation.

5. It was not the habit of Joseph Smith to suppress his revelations. He made every effort to see to it that each excerpt from the book of Abraham was published to the world the moment it was presentable. "One cannot read the pages of the early periodicals of the Church," writes James R. Clark, "... without being impressed with the fact that to Joseph Smith, availability of the new revelations of God where people could read them and immediately profit by their instruction was more important than the technicality of having a *complete text* of these ancient records at the start..." Hence, Clark notes, it was his custom to publish them in the form of extracts as he went along.<sup>30</sup> But none of our Kirtland Egyptian Papers was ever published in any form; no one is challenged to put these writ-

<sup>28a</sup>Apart from examples in the standard works, the indefatigable Dean Jessee calls our attention to documents dictated or written by the Prophet, e.g.: JS 1832-34 Diary: "Joseph Smith Jr—Record Book Bought for to note all the minute circumstances that comes under my observation." JS 1835-36 Diary: "Sketch Book for the use of Joseph Smith, Jr." 1832 History: "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. . . ." 1842-44 Diary: "President Joseph Smiths Journal"

<sup>29</sup>*Times and Seasons* 3 (Mar. 1, 1842), p. 710.

<sup>30</sup>Clark, pp. 173-4, 99.



## Grammar &amp; Alphabet of the Egyptian Language

This is called *Za-ri-on-hisk*, *Chal-siclon-hisk*. This character is in the fifth degree, independent and arbitrary. It may be increased in the fifth degree while it stands independent and arbitrary. That is, without a straight mark inserted above or below it. By inserting a straight mark over it thus (1) it increases its signification five degrees: by inserting two straight lines, thus (3) its signification is increased five times more. By inserting three straight lines thus (4) its signification is again increased five times more than the last. By counting the number of straight lines and preserving them, or considering them as qualifying adjectives we have the degrees of comparison. There are five connecting parts of speech in the above character, called *Za-ri-on-hisk*. These five connecting parts of speech, for verbs, participles, prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs.

In translating this character, the subject must be continued until there are as many of these connecting parts of speech used as there are connections or connecting points found in the character. But whenever the character is found with the one horizontal line, as at (2) the subject must be continued until <sup>five times</sup> the number of connecting parts of speech are used; or, the full sense of the writer is not conveyed. When two horizontal lines occur, the number of connecting parts of speech are continued five times further - or five degrees. And when three horizontal lines

The entire grammar section of the "Grammar and Alphabet," in the hand of W. W. Phelps, consists of this page and half of the following. The reader can decide for himself whether any of this material was used in the composition of the Book of Abraham, and if so how.

5 parts of speech: increase by one straight line thus  $5 \times 5 = 25$



ings to the test, as all the world was invited to examine the Facsimiles and their explanations; no claims of revelation are made for them; no one claims authorship for them; no one is invited to inspect or comment or criticize. Those who have peddled the papers publicly have advertized them as "suppressed for 130 years." If they were suppressed they can hardly be given the status of official documents, let alone that of a standard work. If the brethren were invited to try a hand at inspired writing and translation, to "study it out in your mind; then . . . ask me if it be right," (D&C 9:8) we need not be surprised if all sorts of speculative papers, diagrams and word-jugglings turn up as remnants of such preliminary study; it would be surprising, rather, if they did not. Even if the Kirtland Papers were the work of Joseph Smith, their existence would not refute his claims to revelation unless by his own declaration they represent his own inspired translation of specific Egyptian texts. As it is, the A. & G. in the hand of Phelps has by our indiscriminating editors been mingled with the pages of three *other* versions of an A. & G., which we must consider before we decide which if any is the responsibility of Joseph Smith.

#### EGYPTIAN MSS. #3, 4 AND 5

6. Beside the *bound* A. & G., the Historian's Office possesses three other documents which have been labeled "Egyptian Mss. #3, 4 and 5." All share common contents with each other and with the A. & G., but each has its own special interpretations. Ms. #3 consists of four pages,  $7\frac{3}{4}$  by  $12\frac{1}{2}$  inches, each written on one side of the paper only. It starts out bravely on page 1 with what it calls "Egyptian Alphabet first degree"; the page is carefully ruled into four columns which are headed, from left to right, "Character," "letter," "sound," and "Explanation." (See illustration.) Twenty-three hieratic signs are listed in the "Character" column, each one to be transliterated in the "letter" column into our alphabet, given its phonetic value in the next column, and finally receive a single "explanation" of one short line. The system is quite different from the one followed in the A. & G. The one-line explanations are carried on for the first page and for ten characters on the second page, but there they come to a stop: the next nineteen characters (the list of twenty-three



Egyptian Character	Alphabet	first degree	Explanation
	ah	Sound	
⌘	ah		The first Being, who exercises supreme power
⌘	Pha-e		The first man, or one who has kingly power, or king
⌘	Pha		a more universal reign, having greater dominion, or power
⌘	Pha-ho-e-oop		Royal family, Royal blood, or Pharaoh, or supreme power, or king
⌘	Ho-oop-hah		Crown of a prince, or signifies Queen.
⌘	Zi		Virgin, unmarried, virtuous, or the principle of virtue.
⌘	Tah-toumun		The name of the royal family, in the female line
⌘	Zi-oop-hah		An unmarried woman, & a virgin, & prince
⌘	Ho-e-oop		A young unmarried man - a prince.
⌘	Zip=zi		a woman, married or unmarried, daughter
⌘	Ho-e-oop-hah		Crown of a prince, or king
⌘	Oan, or ah		The earth
⌘	toan, tah, or ota		= beneath, below, under, water
⌘	ota		Eye = to see = sight, sometimes Me, myself
⌘	ota tan=zipzi		Egypt. The land first seen, by a woman, under water
⌘	In=e=eh=ni		What other person is that? Who?
⌘	Ho-e-oop hah=Pha-e		Ruler, government, <sup>power</sup> right, King, born
⌘	Zub-zool=Oan		The beginning, first, before appointing to
⌘	Zub-zool oan=eh		In the beginning of the earth, or creation
⌘	Zub=eh		To be in - as light in the earth
⌘	Zub		The first creation of any thing <sup>or first institution</sup>
⌘	Zub zool		from the first to any stated period after
⌘	Zool		From a fixed period of time back to the beginning

Second part of the first degree.

A	A	Almeops	God without beginning or end
⌘	⌘	Alph	In the beginning with God the Son or first born
⌘	⌘	Albette	Angels or disembodied spirits or saints.
⌘	⌘	Alkabeth	Angels in an unattainable state, men after they are raised
⌘	⌘	Alkebette	Ministers of God, high priests, kings
⌘	⌘	Alchibette	Ministers of God, <del>under</del> than high priests -
⌘	⌘	Alkabette	Ministers not ordained of God, simple
⌘	⌘	Alkibette	Ministers who are less simple for want of power
⌘	⌘	Baseth	The name of all men, &c.

This "Egyptian Alphabet" by W. W. Phelps treats only 23 symbols, and the explanations cease after only a page and a half. It differs considerably from Phelps' treatment of his "Alphabet" in his "A. & G." as well as from the Joseph Smith "Alphabet." Note that ambitious four-column beginning that is never followed through. Note especially that each character is interpreted in so few words that the basic idea can be expressed in two different ways in less than a line of text. This is in complete disagreement with the supposed translation of the characters in the Book of Abraham Mss., in which each symbol requires a paragraph of 50 or 100 or more words for its interpretation.



being repeated over and over again under different "parts" and "degrees") have their "sound" indicated, but no equivalent English "letter," and no "explanation" is offered for any of them. For the next seventeen characters, including the first seven on page 3, not even the sounds are given. Thus as in the A. & G. proper this great project begins to fizzle out on the second page, and grinds to a halt on the third. It is significant that this document, like the A. & G., is in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps. An "alphabet" designated by the Historian's Office as 'Egyptian Mss. #4, ca. 1837' may well be in Joseph Smith's own hand. It is on the same type and size of paper as Phelps' "Eg. Ms. #3" and like it, occupies four pages. But there is an important difference between the two texts. In the "Joseph Smith" version the columns for "letters" and "sounds" are entirely missing. The Phelps project is plainly the more ambitious of the two.

A third "Alphabet" text (Egyptian Ms. #5") is like the others of four pages only, on the same paper and obviously produced as part of the same campaign. The interesting thing is the way the three men disagree in their interpretations, each going his own way. Take for example the one sign that is constantly being rehashed in all the "Grammar and Alphabet" writings, the well-known reed-sign, perhaps the most important and certainly the commonest of all hieroglyphic symbols. A special treatment of the reed-sign is tacked on at the end of each of the three copies. A comparison of the three texts is instructive.

Ms. #3:   Za ki on-hish,                   or                   Kulsidonhish, in the land of the  
                 Chaldees

~~Za ki an hish~~ Ahbrah aam, the father of  
the faithful

thrones  
~~the first right, unto whom is committed~~  
 Ms. #4: Ah-bra-oam. Signifies father of the faithful. The  
 first right—the elder

~~Ah-braam-~~  
~~Ah bra-oam. Signifies father of the faithful. The~~  
~~first right. The elder~~

Ms. #5: Zakii<sup>a</sup>an-hish, or Kulsidoniash - The land of the Chaldeans.

Each of these is interpreting the same sign, with no sovereign master-mind to bring them to a unity of the faith. Cowdery



and Phelps hear different sounds and come up with different meanings. And Joseph freely lets them go their way while he goes his, each under obligation to "study it out in your mind" *before* asking for revelation. This is something that anti-Mormon writers have wilfully misinterpreted from the first. Why, they have asked, would a prophet have to speculate and sweat like anybody else? Here is Brigham Young undertaking long and costly experiments to see whether corn or peaches or sugar beets or silkworms would thrive in the Great Basin. Some crops withered away, and others, contrary to the predictions of all the experts, flourished magnificently. If Brigham was a prophet, his enemies said, why didn't God spare him the trouble of all that trial and error by giving him all the answers right at first? To which he answered, Why should God do that? Brigham and the people were all the wiser for their experience and, as the Mormons have always taught, our express purpose in coming to this earth is to gain just such experience. All his life Joseph Smith dealt with ancient documents, constantly stretching his own mind to bridge the gap of the unknown, and then calling upon the Lord when a problem exceeded his powers. It is thus that we grow in knowledge and understanding.

#### NO KEY TO TRANSLATION

All the Grammar and Alphabet projects viewed so far aborted dismally; none of them could ever have been used even as an imaginary basis for constructing the story of Abraham. Consider a few points:

1. The A. & G. is a bound book, still complete with no pages missing. Yet only 34 pages have writing on them while 186 are left blank. The written pages do not, however, run consecutively, but are scattered at intervals throughout the book, an average of 3 written pages being followed by 18 to 20 blank ones. Thus only about one-sixth of the intended operation was completed. The pages carefully arranged and set apart for the other five-sixths were never used. The A. & G. is thus a work barely begun, but that is not all—even the written part is but a timid preliminary, for

2. the A. & G. contains only *one* page of grammar, and that is limited to a discussion of degrees of comparison. These







2 Egyptian alphabet first given second part

1 Bethche the fifth high priest from Adam

2 Bethche the first residence fruitful garden of great mercy a place of happiness 1 times

3 Bethche an other place of residence of a more fruitful garden a larger place of happiness greater happiness 2 times

4 Bethche the third place 3 times Bethche

5 Bethche the fourth place 5 times Bethche

6 Bethche the fifth place 5 times Bethche

7 Bethche the six place 5 Bethche

8 Bethche in truth the whole Earth is the largest <sup>part</sup> the greatest enjoyment on Earth Garden of the Earth.

9 Bethche in truth eternity

10 Bethche the greater place of happiness where God resides the Celestial Kingdom

11 Bethche in truth

12 Bethche in truth

13 Bethche in truth

14 Bethche in truth

15 Bethche in truth

16 Bethche in truth

17 Bethche in truth

18 Bethche in truth

19 Bethche in truth

20 Bethche in truth

21 Bethche in truth

22 Bethche in truth

23 Bethche in truth

24 Bethche in truth

25 Bethche in truth

26 Bethche in truth

27 Bethche in truth

28 Bethche in truth

29 Bethche in truth

30 Bethche in truth

31 Bethche in truth

32 Bethche in truth

33 Bethche in truth

34 Bethche in truth

35 Bethche in truth

36 Bethche in truth

37 Bethche in truth

38 Bethche in truth

39 Bethche in truth

40 Bethche in truth

An "Egyptian Alphabet" in the handwriting of Joseph Smith (Eg. Ms. #4). Note (1) that the Egyptian signs are arranged according to form—vertical, horizontal, diagonal, etc.; that the explanations are systematic classifications (a) of the hierarchy of royal power and its establishment in the land (part one), and (b) of heavenly power and its transfer to mankind ("second part"); (2) that the text differs in many particulars from that of W. W. Phelps; (3) that only 23 symbols are considered in each part, while the "second part" does not go beyond Aleph and Beth, the first two letters of the alphabet. From this it would appear (1) that we have here a perfectly sane and rational approach to a problem, (2) that the approach is experimental and not authoritarian, and (3) that it was abandoned at an early stage.



degrees are referred to in dealing with the symbols that make up the Alphabet, and yet

3. the Alphabet that follows consists of only thirty symbols. With hundreds of hieroglyphic and thousands of hieratic symbols to choose from, the author throughout limits himself to only thirty of them. Why, since he is by no means bound by the conventional definition of an alphabet, does he stop with thirty?

4. And why, of the thirty symbols, is only *one*—the first one—completely explained? And why does he exhaust his ingenuity explaining that one (the reed-symbol, of course) no less than fifteen times, each time with a different shade of meaning? Some of the other symbols get short explanations, and these too are explained over and over again, each in its various “parts” and “degrees” while retaining its basic meaning. Even so, only half-a-dozen hieratic symbols are explained and all the rest of the magnificent accumulation of signs at the disposal of our scholars are ignored.

5. Stranger still, the signs that are explained are not found in the real Egyptian documents, where no system is in evidence of the placing of one, two, or three strokes above a sign, for example, and where there is nothing whatever to indicate the remarkably Ogam-like arrangement of symbols in the A. & G. And while the fascinating hieroglyphs that flank Facsimile No. 1 are duly noted and repeatedly listed, they receive no treatment at all, even though they are real pictures and far more suggestive of ideas than anything in the hieratic lists. What is more, the signs treated in the “grammatical” texts are *not* the signs that turn up in the margins of “B. of A. Mss. #2 and #3,” from which signs the Book of Abraham is supposed to have been copied. The point we wish to make here is not that the stuff is confused and nonsensical, but that it never came anywhere near approaching the point at which its author could pretend that the one-page grammar and the six-letter alphabet were serviceable.

6. It is maintained by Howard, Turner, et al. that the A. & G. is “Joseph Smith’s working papers,” showing us the toilsome and tedious steps of a creative work in progress. “Working papers” in the form of a bound volume, neatly written out in final and unalterable form? Working papers in a fair hand, without smudging, erasing, rewriting, without additions or alterations? Working papers without a dot set



down by the intervening hand of Joseph Smith? In short, working papers that show no signs of any work but the scribal exercise of copying down an already completed text, free of any evidence of hesitation or deliberation? We have in the whole A. & G. fewer words than are contained in the average magazine feature-story—about thirteen typewritten pages. Can this represent long years of coming to grips with the Book of Abraham? At most this might be the final result of a lot of work—but the actual process of years of toil, the working papers of Joseph Smith? That is utter nonsense.

7. For what has the A. & G. to do with the Book of Abraham? In the “explanations,” six incomplete and disconnected phrases from the text of the Book of Abraham are quoted, and that is all (Abr. 1:2, 3, 23, 26; 2:3, 5). These are not sentences but simply very brief expressions taken out of context. They appear with proper meaning and context in the Book of Abraham, but only in a fragmentary and disconnected state in the A. & G. Which makes it perfectly clear that the Abraham text was already completed at the time these expressions were borrowed from it to help make the grammar. All the words quoted from the Book of Abraham in the A. & G. put together make up less than the bulk of the single verse Abr. 1:2. The thought of the Book of Abraham being worked out from, or even with the aid of the A. & G. which came later and contains not an iota of the material in that book, is simply ridiculous.

8. Because of the peculiar system of classes and degrees, almost every passage in the A. & G. appears more than once, and most of the symbols are given more than one interpretation. Thus Parrish gives five different explanations of the “Kolob” sign. Whatever the nature of the game these gentlemen are playing, it is of no help to a translator when any symbol can, without the slightest alteration, take on half-a-dozen different meanings. Which are we to take as the official translation?

9. Where do we find any evidence that any of the absurdly elaborate apparatus of the A. & G. was ever put to use? What are we to make of the total neglect of the more than 120 exotic names found in the pages of the A. & G., none of which ever finds its way into the Book of Abraham?<sup>31</sup> The Book of Abra-

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<sup>31</sup>Seven of the names appear in the explanation to Facsimile No. 2, but that is a modern document. The point is not whether the names are supposed to be authentic but whether they were used in composing the Book of Abraham.



ham is much concerned with numbers: why does none of the 79 surviving symbols or the ingenious names which designate the Egyptian numerals in the Kirtland Papers ever show up in the Book of Abraham? Why if the "alphabet" was devised for the translating of the book, do none of the 30 symbols of that alphabet have anything to do with it, except for 5 astronomical symbols in Fac. 2? A Homeric grammar is based on Homer, a New Testament grammar on the New Testament; but the A. & G. and other papers supposedly based on the Egyptian texts of the Book of Abraham are almost entirely filled with stuff that has no relationship to the Book of Abraham as we have it.

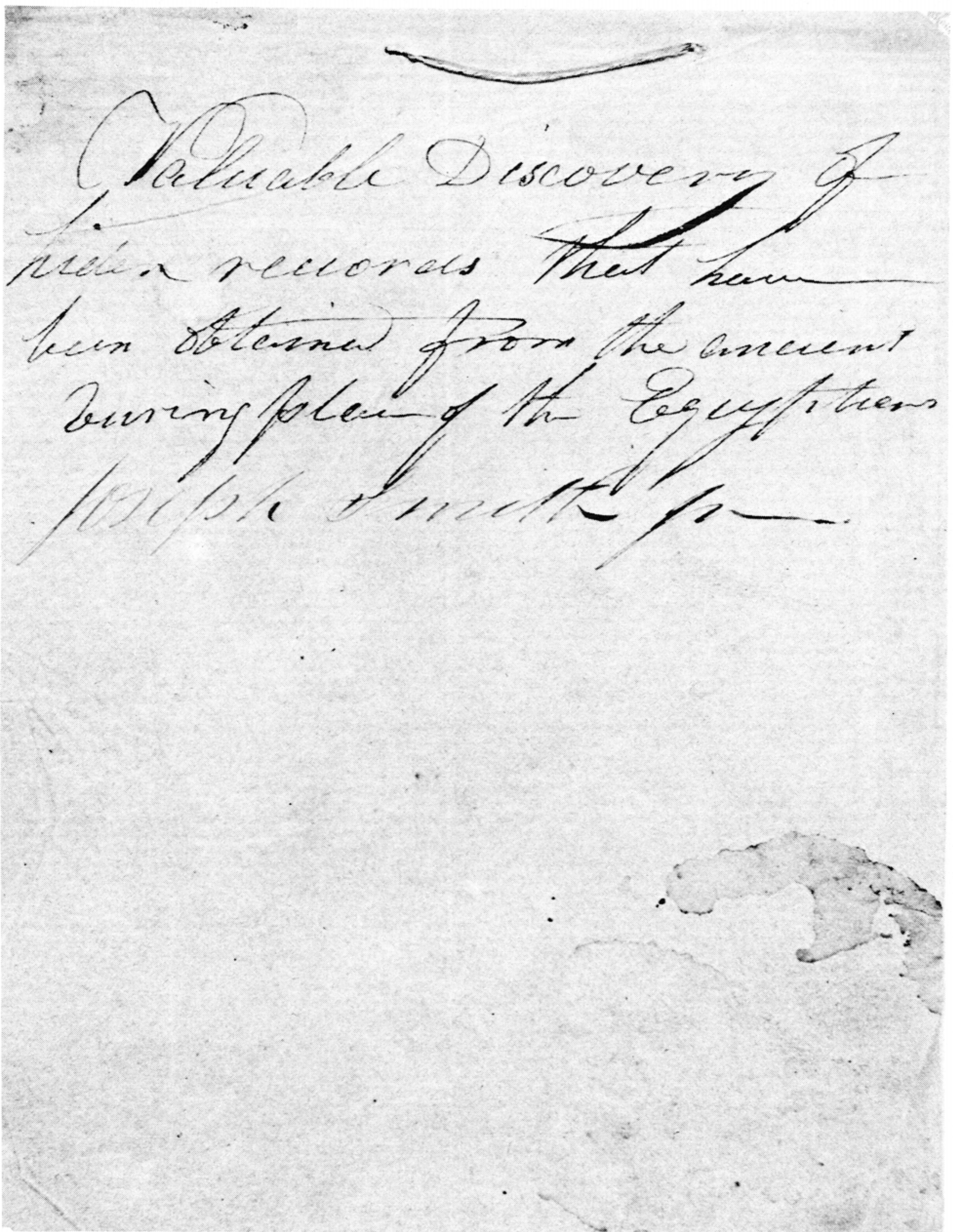
#### TRANSLATIONS WITH EGYPTIAN SYMBOLS

Now we come to the critics' Exhibit A, those manuscripts taken from the stolen film and published to the world as absolute proof that Joseph Smith did not translate Egyptian but mistook the *Book of Breathings* for the story of Abraham. We refer to two manuscript copies of the first chapter and part of the second chapter of the Book of Abraham which contain in their left-hand margins a number of hieratic symbols. It is assumed that the English text is a translation of the Egyptian characters. This is taking a lot for granted, even on the evidence of the two texts, which go in the Historian's Office under the titles of "B. of A. Mss. # 1 and # 4." Let us consider them before turning to the more important "Mss. #2 and #3" which were not available to our pirates.

1. The first thing we notice about the Egyptian symbols in the margins is that they are *not* the symbols found in the A. & G. and related works. If the Book of Abraham is supposed to be based on the latter, then these hieratic characters cannot be considered as its source. And there is no reason why they should be, aside from the argument of mere juxtaposition.

2. But the position of the symbols raises more doubts than confidence: there are not nearly enough of them; they are much too far apart. Much capital has been made of the ridiculous disproportion between the eighteen brief hieratic symbols, which take up just two short lines of the Book of Breathings, and the long and involved history of Abraham which is supposedly derived from them. It is as if one were to detect evidence of fraud in the absurd disproportion between the page





Valuable Discovery of  
hidden records that have  
been obtained from the ancient  
burial place of the Egyptians  
Joseph Smith Jr.

Joseph Smith has put his signature on the front cover of an Egyptian text which he labels a "Valuable Discovery." The text itself, however, consists only of two pages of hieratic copied down in a modern hand, without any translation, and a note, in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery, about a princess "Katumin" who is supposed to have lived a thousand years after Abraham and so has nothing to do with his story.



number on this page and the mass of print that goes along with it—can a little number possibly contain all that information? Well, is it supposed to? The clever men who wrote these strange documents had studied ancient languages at school, and were quite as capable of noticing and pointing out such discrepancies as are the learned editors of the *Salt Lake Messenger*. For this we have good evidence in two Kirtland documents which deserve a brief side trip.

#### THE "VALUABLE DISCOVERY" AND ITS TWIN

The only document among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers that bears the signature of Joseph Smith is a booklet (Eg. Ms. #6) that has been made by doubling over six strips of tough, thin, unlined paper to form a brochure of 12 pages, 6 by 6  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches, sewn together along the fold. On the outside of the binding, which is made of a sheet of thinner and darker tissue paper and has slightly larger dimensions, is written in a bold scrawl: "Valuable Discovery of hidden records that have been obtained from the ancient burying place of the Egyptians. Joseph Smith Jr." On the first of the following pages are 17 lines of Egyptian text, rather poorly copied hieratic characters from a funeral document. Under this in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery is a brief note stating where the text was found. There is no attempt at translation or interpretation. The next page contains seven more lines of the same Egyptian text and nothing else—not a word of English. The third and last page contains two brief notes in Cowdery's hand on the chronology of a certain Princess Katumin, the first note preceded by three and the second by two unrecognizable characters. Since each note begins with the name of Katumin, one wonders how the name could be derived from totally different symbols. Was it supposed to be?

Along with the "Valuable Discovery" booklet goes another (Eg. Ms. # 7) made exactly like it of the same kind of paper and with the same type of cover, this time bearing the scrawled name of "Williams" on the back, as well as the initials "F G W." So this would seem to be Frederick G. Williams' work—only it is not, for the book inside is written in the hand of W. W. Phelps. Oliver may have been acting as Joseph's scribe in this operation, but in that case was Phelps the scribe for Williams? We can't take the name on the cover of either of these books as proof of authorship. But here is







W. W. Phelps again; on page 1 of his booklet we find word for word the same two statements about the Princess Katumin as appear on the last page of the Cowdery version (Phelps calls her "Kah-tou-mun" in his "Alphabet or Eg. Ms. # 3"); only this time the enigmatic characters supplied by Cowdery are missing—Phelps has none of them. Instead he adds an extremely important note by entitling his treatise on the princess "*A Translation of the next page.*" Here at last is the *only* known case in which a specific English text is said to be a translation of a specific given Egyptian document. The "next page" in question is a numbered page in a bound book, so there can be no mistake about it. Phelps wants us to believe that the Egyptian text on that page is the original story of Katumin. And it gives us quite a surprise when we turn to it, for to match the four short lines of Phelps' English text he gives us a good three-plus lines of Egyptian text, thus preserving a very nice balance between the number of words in each. Phelps knew perfectly well that the Greek and Hebrew Testaments are no mere pamphlets compared with the King James Bible, and here he leaves no possible doubt that he considers a decent proportion advisable between his Egyptian and English texts.

This is important because the disproportion between the length of Egyptian signs and English sentences is labored as the principal argument against the Book of Abraham, and the most important evidence for this is B. of A. Ms. # 4 in the handwriting of the astute and sensible Phelps. One needs no knowledge of Egyptian to point out that a dot and two strokes can hardly contain the full message of an English paragraph of a hundred words or more. In 1967 a Mr. Heward passed around handbills at a General Conference pathetically asking, "Why should anyone want to fight the truth?"—the "truth" being his own great discovery that if somebody translates a single dot as the story of Little Red Riding Hood something must be out of joint: "Could a single dot carry that much meaning?" Mr. Heward asked with eminent logic. We are asked to believe that this point escaped all the smart men of Kirtland, who persisted for no reason at all in deriving a whole book from less than two dozen signs, when they had thousands of such signs to draw from, and thereby achieved such monumental absurdity as no child could fail to notice. In 1970 Messrs. Howard and Turner bring forth as the crowning evi-



dence against Joseph Smith Mr. Dee J. Nelson's sensational find that the hieratic word *ms.t* is translated by Joseph Smith with a paragraph of 132 words. It never occurred to anyone to ask, in the glad excitement, whether this was really Joseph Smith's work and whether *ms.t* was ever believed by anyone to contain a story of 132 words. Actually, the text from which Mr. Nelson got his *ms.t* was written by Phelps (it is B. of A. Ms. # 2), and we have just seen that Phelps knew very well how the texts should balance up. Maybe there is something the critics don't know about.

3. Looking at the first page of each of our two Abraham manuscripts (B. of A. Mss. # 2 and # 3), we note that both are numbered "page 1"—the story begins here. But what do we find? The first line is introduced by an Egyptian symbol, right enough, but opposite that symbol is not a line from the Book of Abraham but the words

second

sign of the fifth degree of the ~~first~~ part.  
And then the next line is introduced by another Egyptian symbol and begins with the words

mine

I sought for ~~the~~ appointment ~~where unto~~ unto the priesthood

Page 1 of both texts begins not with the story of Abraham but with the fourth verse—a whole column left out; what comes before is not the Abraham story but something about grammar, leaving no room for the preceding verses even if this were not marked "page 1." Is this the way one begins translating a book?

4. Next we note that Sign No. 3 (the third from the top) is placed over against the English text right in the middle of a sentence and squarely between two lines of "translation," the "translator" thus leaving us in complete doubt as to just what lines are supposed to be translated from that sign. As it stands, the hieratic symbol cannot possibly be matched up with any particular sections, paragraph, sentence, or line of the Abraham story.

5. Compare this same symbol as it appears in B. of A. Mss. # 2 and # 3. In the latter we see within the bent arm of power a conspicuous circle with a dash inside it; circle and dash are completely absent, however, from Ms. # 2. Can such a prominent feature be blithely ignored where every little dot and line necessarily speaks volumes? It would seem that ac-



curacy of detail means little to our copyists, who are satisfied as long as the general configuration of a symbol is recognizable—not for translation purposes, patently, but as some sort of marker. In both manuscripts the Egyptian characters are placed throughout in exactly the same *position* with relationship to the English text, while considerable license is taken with the manner in which they are drawn. Which indicates that they are meant as guides or markers of some sort rather than as containing every detail of the long and involved text within their tiny scope. This is born out if we consider the next symbol.

6. Symbol No. 4 in B. of A. Ms. # 4 stands opposite what looks like a new paragraph or section. The preceding line ends abruptly in the middle of the page and even has a period to finish it. And sure enough there is a brand-new Egyptian symbol in the margin to start us off with a new idea or story. Only one thing is wrong: what should be the new section or paragraph begins right in the middle not just of a sentence but of a clause, its opening words being “utterly refused to hearken . . .” What our Egyptian character marks in this case is not an idea, a word, a phrase, sentence, or paragraph, but the point at which a scribe takes up his pen—right in the middle of a sentence. Again, the writers of Mss. # 2 and # 3 make no effort to have their hieroglyphic signs agree in anything but general appearance: a carefully partitioned circle in one is but a hasty loop in the other.

7. Seven lines down from this symbol in Ms. # 3 our scribe (Warren Parrish) begins a new paragraph, and rightly so, since at this point a new theme is introduced, a discussion of human sacrifice (Abr. 1:7). Here if ever is the proper place for an Egyptian symbol to tell the new story—but there is none! The author of the English version is utterly indifferent to any possible Egyptian writing that might supply him with the needed information. First a character where none should be and then no character where such is indispensable—our scribes make not even the crudest, most elementary effort to match up their “translations” with their purported sources.

8. Look at the next sign, No. 5. It is placed in Ms. # 3 exactly between the lines:

	“ . . . the hand of the priest of Elkener
Sign	The priest of Elkkener was also the prie-



Plainly it does not mark the beginning of a new section or the introduction of a new idea, for the two lines practically repeat each other. But turning to Ms. # 2 and the same sign we find that this scribe begins a new section at this point: he does not end the preceding section with a period, but simply breaks off in the middle of a line; and he does not begin the next line with a capital, but he does indent it. Why no punctuation? Because there is no break in the meaning. Why then the interrupted line and the new indentation, both completely ignored by the writer of Ms. # 3? Because at this point the writer resumes operations. Again the two copyists make no effort to have their Egyptian symbols match in detail, indeed one must look twice to detect the resemblance between their marks—an unthinkable situation if they thought that every Egyptian squiggle and dot was loaded with detailed information. Halfway between Symbols No. 4 and 5 Parrish has marked what looks like a small equal sign in his margin, but there is no such mark in the other manuscript—another indication that the marginal signs do not supply the meaning of the text.

9. Information-wise, Sign No. 4 showers us with a generous catalogue of exotic proper names—Elkkenir, Libnah, Mahmakhrah, and the god of Pharaoh King of Egypt, tells us how the people hardened their hearts to the preaching of Abraham, how the heathen offered their children to idols, how the priest of Elkkena (mentioned for the second time, with an alteration of spelling—how is that indicated in the symbol?) tried to put Abraham to death, etc. It is quite a story for one little picture to convey, especially when the copyists don't particularly care about details in drawing it. The next sign, No. 5, is a very simple affair—two straight dashes, a circle, and a tiny T-shaped figure, but it manages to convey the name of Pharaoh no less than four times, once specifically as "Pharaoh King of Egypt," without giving any credit to Sign No. 4; then it goes on to tell about an altar built in the land of Chaldea, about human sacrifice to "the god of Pharaoh" (another steal from Sign No. 4), about Shagreel (his name repeated twice) who was identified with the sun, about the rites at Potiphar's Hill in the Plain of Olisheem—all that jammed into four strokes and a circle—a circle which the two manuscripts draw quite differently. Well, the same phrases and images go on being presented by a series



of quite different signs, and then we get to Sign No. 8, and though it is quite different from the other characters it brings us right back to our old friends Elkkindir, Libnah, Mahmach-rah, and the god of Pharaoh King of Egypt, with the Chaldeans thrown in for good measure. What goes on here? Couldn't the translator remember what he had just translated? He didn't need to, for it was right on the page before his eyes in his own handwriting. Yet he keeps on reading the same list of names and epithets by way of rendering totally different Egyptian characters, and having achieved a miracle of economy by squeezing gallons of juice out of one tiny lemon he does not make use of his precious symbol when he needs to express the same things again, but simply picks up any symbol that happens to be at hand and makes use of that. The basic rule of this grammar is that any Egyptian character will express any name or situation or combination of names or situations imaginable. If Sign No. 5 tells us about the sacrifice of three virgins, Sign No. 6 can tell us the same story all over again while assuming quite another shape. On the other hand, don't ever worry about needing another symbol after one symbol has been milked for a minor epic—though there are thousands of characters available, you can forget about them and go on adding episode after episode to your one-symbol story: there is no limit to what you can read into it—one small symbol is "translated" by over 180 words. With such principles in operation, who cares about grammar? Why all this head-splitting about symbols when any symbol will do?

10. The fact is that there is no head-splitting. Nobody pays any attention to the Egyptian symbols; no Egyptian character is ever redrawn or corrected, or discussed or ever referred to in whole or in part. True, some symbols are discussed in the A. & G., but these are not the symbols, and if one can imagine any principles of translation deducible from the Grammar, it is impossible to discover any sign of their being applied in PGP Copies 3 and 4.

11. Prolonging our second glance at B. of A. Mss. # 2 and # 3, we are surprised and puzzled to note that the text of the Book of Abraham before our eyes is written down in a neat, flawless hand, without any signs of hesitation or exasperation. Only a few minor touches distinguish it from our printed text of Abraham. As in the A. & G., everything is tidy and correct, with no signs of creativity or normal pangs of composition, to



Translation of the Book of Abraham written  
by his own hand upon papyrus and found  
in the catacombs of Egypt

In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my  
fathers, I, Abraham, saw, that it was needful  
for me to obtain another place of residence, and see-  
ing there was greater happiness and peace and rest  
for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and  
the right wherewith I should be ordained to admin-  
ister the same: Having been a follower of righteousness,  
desiring to be one who possessed great  
knowledge; a greater follower of righteous-  
ness; a possessor of greater knowledge;  
a father of many nations; a prince  
of peace; one who keeps the commandments of  
God; a rightful heir; a high priest, holding  
the right belonging to the fathers, from the be-  
ginning of time; even from the beginning, or  
before the foundation of the earth, down to  
the present time; even the right of the first  
born, or the first man, who is Adam,  
or first father, through fathers, unto me.

"Book of Abraham Ms. #1." An attempt by W. W. Phelps to match Egyptian characters with specific English words is evident from the numbers placed beside the first two hieroglyphs (j and w), the same numbers appearing before the English words "land," "Abraham," and "saw," the basic meaning of the j and w signs according to the "Alphabet" studies. It is quite evident that the plan was quickly given up, none of the following signs being treated in such a manner; which means that they are not being "translated" at all. W. Parrish takes over the writing in the middle of the page, and marks his beginning with an Egyptian symbol, though he begins in the middle of a sentence. There is no discernable relationship between the symbols and the contents of the various sections of text.



say nothing of laborious translation. No "working papers" of a difficult translation ever looked like this. The copyists were writing down the finished or nearly-finished text of the Book of Abraham in a fair, flowing and uninhibited hand, not deriving that text from, of all things, eighteen hieratic marginal symbols.

12. The margins themselves show this: the margins of the English text are remarkably straight and neat, and it is at once apparent that the hieratic symbols must adapt themselves to those margins, and not the other way around. Thus on the last page of B. of A. Ms. #2 W. W. Phelps has kept a neat margin but one more than twice as wide as necessary to accommodate the Egyptian characters; this waste of space and paper would have been avoided had he been adapting his margin to the hieratic signs. On the other hand, on the last three pages of Ms. # 1 some Egyptian characters are squeezed right off the page by a margin that is not wide enough for them, and one jumps over the margin and intrudes a whole inch on the space of the English text. Thus the margins always accommodate the English text, but not the Egyptian symbols. Which can only mean that the English of the Book of Abraham was here copied down *before* the Egyptian signs were added. This was borne out further by the fact that all the marginal Egyptian writing is supplied by a single hand, an expert at copying them, and not by the writers of the English text.<sup>32</sup> We can hardly call evidence that Joseph Smith derived the Book of Abraham from Egyptian symbols documents *not* written by him in which the Abraham text is *not* derived from those symbols.

13. In B. of A. Ms. # 2 the writer after reaching Abr. 2:5 decides to dispense with Egyptian writing altogether. He gives up the margin in the middle of the page and even goes back and recopies verses 4 and 5 without margins, after which he goes on with the Abraham story without the benefit of margins or hieroglyphs. How could he thus depart from his source? What source? Ms. # 2 drops the Egyptian at Abr. 2:5, and Ms. # 3 ends abruptly in the middle of the page with the end of verse 2. In no known document is the exercise with Egyptian characters carried beyond the middle of chapter 2. What,

<sup>32</sup>There are two styles of writing, a thin line-drawing and a heavy brush-like stroke, a good imitation of the original. At least all the drawings of each type are by the same person, who may have tried his hand at both styles.



Therefore a knowledge of the beginning of creation  
and also of the planets, and of the stars, as it was  
man known unto the fathers, have I kept, even  
unto this day.

ME

And I shall endeavour to write some of these things,  
upon this reciter, for the benefit of my posterity,  
that shall come after me.

SVL?

Now the Lord God came the seventh year in the land  
of Ur, inasmuch that Haran my brother died; but  
Terah my father yet lived in the land of Ur of  
the Chaldees. And it came to pass; that Ishtar  
took Sarai to wife, and Nahor my brother took  
Milchah to wife.

2

37X19

Now was the daughter of Terah.

Now the Lord had said unto me, Abraham get thee out of  
thy country, and from thy kindred, and from  
thy father's house, unto a land that I will show  
thee: Therefore I left the land of Ur of the Chaldees  
to go into the land of Canaan; and I took Lot  
my brother's son, and his wife, and Sarai my  
sister, and also my father Terah, and we went  
into the land which we do call Haran, and the  
family abode, and my father Terah was  
in Haran and dwelt there, as there were many  
flocks in Haran; and my father turned again  
unto his idoly: Therefore he continued in  
Haran.

Now the Lord had said unto Abraham get thee  
out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from  
thy father's house, unto a land that I will show  
thee.

"Book of Abraham Ms. # 2." In the handwriting of W. W. Phelps. The  
finished state of the English text, showing no sign of correction or hesitation,  
shows that it was simply copied down, and in no wise indicates a process of  
translation; while the conspicuous failure of the margin to adapt to the  
Egyptian characters indicates that they were added later. At the bottom of the  
page the whole last section (Abr. II, 3-5) is repeated without the benefit of  
the Egyptian symbols, implying that the impatient copyist has decided that he  
can do as well without them.

And Lot my brother's son dwelt with me, and the Lord appeared  
unto me, and I saw the vision, and I saw the angels, and I saw the  
flock in the land, and my father turned again unto his idoly.  
Therefore he continued in Haran, but the Lord appeared  
unto me, and I saw the vision, and I saw the angels, and I saw the  
flock in the land, and my father turned again unto his idoly.



then, is the source of the *other* two-thirds of the Book of Abraham? From what Egyptian text was the rest derived? Certainly not from the Book of Breathings, whose limits are clearly marked. If B. of A. Mss. # 2 and # 3 are to be accepted as evidence of Joseph Smith's folly, we still have to explain the bulk of the Book of Abraham, which cannot be burdened with such indiscretions.

A strange line of reasoning sees in the *sequence* of the signs in the margins "the key to an authentic appraisal of the process by which the Book of Abraham text was formulated by Joseph Smith." The discovery that those signs not only come from the Book of Breathings but actually occur with the English text in the *same order* as in the Egyptian was hailed as a triumph of perspicacity. But if the Mormons decided to use Egyptian symbols for any purpose, what could be more natural than to take them from the Egyptian documents in their possession—where else would they get them? And in making use of such symbols what easier and more natural way than just to copy them down in order? The most interesting characters of all, not meaningless hieratic hentracks, but real pictures, are repeatedly listed in the Kirtland Papers, in the order in which they occur on the papyrus along with Facsimile No. 1 (the "lion couch"); yet no attempt is made to translate any but two of the signs—the two (reed and "w," of course) that happen to be not recognizable pictures of anything. Why doesn't Joseph Smith or anybody else ever attempt the easy fun-task of reading meaning into those eloquent little pictures? There seems to be a positive aversion to the idea of "translating" Egyptian symbols.

#### B OF A. MSS. #1 AND #4

The text designated by the Historian's Office as B. of A. Ms. # 1 gives every indication of being the parent and original of the series to which Mss. #2 and #3, just discussed, belong. Obtained by the Church from the late Will C. Wood, it is ten pages long, on paper 7¾ by 12 inches. It has never been published. At the top of the first page it bears the title: "Translation of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand upon papyrus and found in the Catacombs of Egypt." And to give it further precedence over Mss. # 2 and # 3, this manuscript begins properly at the beginning, with verse 1. It is, in fact, a



sign of the fifth degree of the <sup>second</sup> part  
 I sought for <sup>mine</sup> appointment ~~unto~~  
~~unto~~ unto the priesthood according  
 to the appointment of God unto  
 the fathers concerning the seed  
 my fathers having turned from their  
 righteousness and from the holy  
 commandments which the Lord  
 their God had given unto them  
 unto the worshiping of the gods  
 of the heathens.

utterly refused to hearken to my  
 voice for their hearts were set to do  
 evil and were wholly turned to the  
 God of Elkenem and the god of  
 Gibrah and the god of mabrah  
 and the god of Pharaoh  
 King of Egypt.

Therefore they turned their hearts  
 to the sacrifices of the heathens  
 in offering up their children in  
 these dumb idols, and hardened

"Book of Abraham Ms. #3." Though this is numbered page 1, it begins with  
 a note on grammar, immediately followed *not* by the beginning of the Book  
 of Abraham but by a passage well along in the story (Abr. I, 4). Note that  
 this is a "fair copy" of an already finished text. Note also how the character  
 in the middle of the page marks a new phase of the writing but has no refer-  
 ence whatever to meaning or content. Note that none of the other signs can  
 be matched up with specific ideas or episodes or proper names, the latter oc-  
 ccurring and reoccurring without the slightest regard for the Egyptian symbols.

of Pharaoh now at this time, it  
 was the custom of the priest of Pharaoh  
 the King of Egypt to...



most ambitious and impressive beginning. A three-quarter-inch margin is ruled off on the left and headed "character," and the first two characters to appear in it are the ubiquitous reed and "w"-loop, which happen to be the signs with which the intact De Horrack papyrus of the Book of Breathings (Louvre No. 3284) begins, and the signs with which in all probability the damaged Joseph Smith Papyrus No. XI also began. To these two characters the writer of B. of A. Ms. # 1 gives numbers 1 and 2, using the same numbers to designate particular words in the English text appearing directly opposite these signs, so that we get this:

Reed <sup>1</sup> "w" <sup>2</sup>	<sup>1</sup> In the land of the Chaldees, at the residence of my fathers, I, <sup>2</sup> Abraham, <sup>1</sup> Saw, that it was needful for me to obtain . . .
---------------------------------------	---

Now throughout all the "Grammar and Alphabet" papers the reed sign is given two meanings, namely, (1) "land of the Chaldeans" and (2) the act of seeing, while the loop or "w"-symbol is always said in some way or other to refer to Abraham. Hence there cannot be the slightest doubt that the writer here intends to relate *specific* Egyptian characters to specific English words and ideas. Now this is something like it; this is the sort of demonstration for which we have been looking, in which things are properly pinned down. But alas, if this is the beginning of a rigorous demonstration it is also the ending; for with the second line of the text the project is lamely given up—at that early stage of the game any further attempt to number Egyptian symbols by way of matching them with definite English equivalents is abandoned. The next four lines of text have no matching Egyptian symbols at all, and from then on such signs are scattered at the usual meaningless intervals (that is, with no visible relationship to the *meaning* of the text) as in the other B. of A. Mss. Need we say that this auspicious but brief beginning to B. of A. Ms. # 1 is in the hand of W.W. Phelps? And is it surprising that he peters out at line 18 of the first page, after which Warren Parrish takes over and completes the remaining fourteen lines on the page as well as the remaining nineteen pages of the manuscript? Phelps's last symbol is three little strokes which go with twelve lines of text, and Parrish's next symbol (a dot and three lines) when he takes over is set over against fourteen lines of English. That is *not* how the thing started out, with the first two sym-



bols opposite consecutive lines with numbers to indicate just what in those lines the symbols were supposed to stand for. No, the serious business of "translation" has been given up and what we have thereafter is either mere eyewash or the use of mysterious symbols to help the copyists in coordinating their work, or both. The brethren at that time were not averse to the use of code names and cabbalistic symbols in carrying on their business.

It is quite clear what happened on page 1 of B. of A. Ms. # 1. The enterprising Phelps set out to apply the principles set forth in *his* copy of the A. & G. to *his* copy of the Book of Abraham, and didn't get to first base. In the same way he starts out grandly and folds up miserably with his impressive four-column "Egyptian Alphabet" (Eg. Ms. # 3.) In view of his performance (and he is certainly our number one performer) it is impossible to maintain that he seriously attempted to carry on either his grammar or his translation beyond *two symbols* alone; only the first two, the reed and the "w" were ever fully explained either in the Grammars and Alphabets or the PGP copies, and even Joseph Smith could not derive the whole Book of Abraham from those two symbols. When Parrish in B. of A. Ms. # 1 places the "Chonsu" sign beside 19 lines—182 words—of English text, it is up to the critic to show that he or anybody else really thought of that as an exercise in translation. This last performance, incidentally, is followed by a new story, a new section, and a new paragraph, all properly indented and capitalized—but no Egyptian symbol in sight to provide the information. Opposite a heavy dot in the margin of page 2 is a long sentence containing a parenthetical remark ("Now the god of Shagreel was the Sun"), and we yearn to ask Mr. Heward to explain how the parenthesis and its contents are expressed in the dot.

With pages 7 and 8 of B. of A. Ms. # 1, things begin to get interesting. On page 7, Abr. 2:6 is rendered:

. . . bear my name ~~unto a people which I will give~~ in a strange  
land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an ~~eternal~~  
when  
~~memorial~~ everlasting possession  $\wedge$  ~~if~~ they hearken to my voice.

And on the next page, "I know the beginning from the end" is changed to read "I know the end from the beginning." (Abr. 2:8.) Then a series of parenthetical remarks is inserted by the translator:



. . . and in thee ~~and in~~ (that is in thy priesthood.) and in thy seed, (that is thy priesthood) after thee (that is to say thy literal seed, or the seed of thy body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed . . . (Abr. 2:11.)

In all of these passages not a word has been changed, words have been shifted around and parenthetical remarks have been inserted not to change but to clarify meanings. The end result is exactly as we find it in the printed edition of the PGP. Was the final text, then, taken from this copy? The next two pages show us that it was not, for there the following passages occur:

. . . and I took Sarai, whom I took to ~~wife in Ur of Chaldea~~ wife when I was ~~Jer~~ Jurshon, to come to the land of Canaan. (Page 9.)

This is quite different from the final text of Abr. 2:15:

And I took Sarai, whom I took to wife when I was in Ur, in Chaldea . . . and came forth in the way to the land of Canaan.

Only at the end of the next verse do we get the rest of the sentence:

. . . by the way of Jershon, to come to the land of Canaan.

And on the last page we read:

. . . into the <sup>borders</sup> ~~land~~ <sup>land of the</sup> ~~^~~ of the <sup>^</sup> Canaanites, and the land of the idolatrous nation.

Compare this with Abr. 2:18:

. . . into the borders of the land of the Canaanites, and I offered sacrifice there in the plains of Moreh, and called on the Lord devoutly, because we had already come into the land of the idolatrous nation.

Here the end result in Copy 1 is definitely not the official text.

Thus B. of A. Ms. #1 has the marks of a work in progress, and we can be sure that the final confused and jumbled verse is as far as it got. It begins with W.W. Phelps's setting out to give us a genuine analytical translation, but fizzles out on the first page; what follows is a simple straightforward copying of Abraham chapter 1 by Warren Parrish; with chapter 2 the writer begins casting about for better wording, rearranging



but never changing words; on the last two pages his text differs from the present official version, and ends up in a state of confusion marking the end of the project at Abraham 2:18. It was copying, but copying with discussion. When a reading is changed in one of the three copies of B. of A. Mss. # 1, 2 and 3, it is usually altered in the other two as well, showing that men were working together; but the end results are not always the same, as in Abraham 2:15, where the writer has written and then struck out the words that stand in B. of A. Ms. #4 *and* in the present official version. It is as if the scribes were being encouraged to think for themselves.

#### B. OF A. MS. #4

The Church Historian's "Book of Abraham Ms. # 4" bears on the back of it the date 1841 in the hand of Thomas Bullock, though the document itself is in the handwriting of Willard Richards. This writing, coming years after the others, is, as might be expected, closer to our present-day version than the others. It bears the title later appearing in the *Times and Seasons* version of March 1, 1842, and the 1851 version published by Richard's nephew Franklin D. Richards, in 1851:

A Translation of Some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands, from the Catacombs of Egypt, purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt, called the *Book of Abraham*, written by his own hand upon papyrus. THE BOOK. of A.B.R.A.HAM.

On the back of the second page of B. of A. Ms. # 4 is written: "A Fac-Similee from the Book of Abraham—Explanation of the above cut." The twelve explanations to Facsimiles No. 1 then follow as they stand in the present Book of Abraham, except that the much-discussed philological explanation of item 12 is missing. Filed with Ms. # 4 are also four pages, 8 by 10 inches, in the hand of Willard Richards, containing the explanations of Facsimile No. 2, exactly as found in our PGP. There is also a copy of the damaged Fac. 2 on a slightly larger sheet of paper.

Book of Abraham Ms. # 4 differs both from the other B. of A. Mss. and from the final printed text. Thus we find Abraham 1:4 first disagreeing with the other versions and then corrected to agree with them:







1. Translation of Some  
Ancient Records that have fallen  
into our hands, from the Catacombs of  
Egypt, purporting to be the writings  
of Abraham, while he was in Egypt,  
called the Book of Abraham, written  
by his own hand upon papyrus.

W. RICHARDS. 1841.

In the Land of the Chaldeans, at the  
Residence of my father, I, Abraham,  
said, that it was needful for me  
to obtain another place of Residence,  
and ~~finding~~ <sup>finding</sup> there was greater happiness  
and peace. But for me, I sought  
for the blessings of the Father, & the  
Right whereunto I should be ordained  
to administer the same; having been  
myself a follower of Righteousness, desiring

"Book of Abraham Ms. #4, 1841," in the handwriting of Willard Richards.  
Not properly one of the "Kirtland Egyptian Papers," this manuscript shows  
that the text is still fluid in the Nauvoo period, though alterations are very  
minor. Here Richards changes the "seeing" of the earlier versions to "finding."  
With the same freedom, the phrase "purporting to be" has been dropped from  
the official title in our present-day edition.

of Righteousness, and to possess a greater  
power.



pearing in the A. & G. are *not* those found in the margins of the PGP copies. The claim that these documents show us exactly how the Book of Abraham was translated is the purest nonsense. Incidentally, the retouches in the text continued long after Kirtland. In our own time the important title of the 1851 edition was changed: "Translated from the Papyrus, by Joseph Smith" has been added, and the significant qualification "Records . . . *purporting to be* the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt," has been dropped.

#### MYSTERIOUS MARKINGS

A variety of markings—letters, numbers, dashes, and dots—serve in the Kirtland Papers to coordinate the work and avoid confusion where a number of people are dealing with the same stuff. As we have seen, the pages of the various series are numbered, and the pages of B. of A. Ms. # 4 are coordinated by number with those of a missing manuscript. A series of capital letters, each with two strokes under it, runs through all the papers, placed there by a single hand to avoid confusion by identifying each separate sheet. Not all the pages are so marked, and no effort is made to follow a rigorous order; thus six pages of B. of A. Ms. # 3 bear the letters O through S, in proper order, but in reverse, while elsewhere the letters appear in the same order as the pages. The letters do not have any necessary relation to page numbers, the pages lettered A,B,C, D,E,F,G,H,I, being matched by the numbers 6,?,1,2,3,4,1,2, and blank, respectively in the A. & G. Two loose two-page spreads, though marked with the usual underlined capital letters (this time T, U, and V), bear on each of their two pages capital O's and W's respectively—not underlined. Sometimes the capitals with strokes under them appear in the left-hand margins of B. of A. Ms. # 2 and # 3 right along with the Egyptian symbols, which the unwary might easily confuse with them. This should admonish us that the position of a symbol next to a text does not necessarily prove that the text is a translation of the sign. It was entirely in keeping with the learned obscurity and exotic nature of their work for the brethren to employ not only letters and numerals to mark off various phases of their undertaking, but to draw also on the wonderful Egyptian symbols that had so astonishingly come into their hands. To this day but few middle-westerners have ever seen



a real Egyptian papyrus, and for the genuine article to turn up in Kirtland, Ohio, of all places in 1835, is against all the rules of probability. Our copyists can take the hieratic symbols or leave them alone, and the same applies to the other symbols. Each type was added by a single person, concerned not with interpretation but with bringing the work of a number of hands together in some sort of correlation.

#### WHAT IS BEHIND ALL THIS?

It would seem that Joseph Smith is working with the brethren, but they are doing a lot of things on their own. What strikes one first of all is the overpowering predominance of one hand and mind in the work—those of W. W. Phelps. In his handwriting is the bound A. & G., the "Grammar and Alphabet Copy 1," the important B. of A. Ms. # 1, and the "Katumin" document which claims to be the actual translation of an accompanying text. Each of these writings is the most ambitious and revealing of its type. And was Phelps simply the faithful scribe? Far from it! Almost as soon as he met Joseph Smith he was made "printer to the Church," a title which, as J. R. Clark points out, meant far more than "that simply of a pressman."<sup>33</sup> Before joining the Church Phelps had already been the editor of three newspapers (founder of two), employing his craft to broadcast the power of a universal mind. His biographer gives him the epithet of "the versatile"—"printer, hymn writer, poet-journalist, newspaper editor, judge, orator, scribe, lawyer, educator, . . . pioneer, explorer, writer of books and pamphlets, topographical engineer, superintendent of schools, surveyor general, weather man, chaplain of the lower house of representatives, and speaker of the house in the legislature . . ."<sup>34</sup> Though only thirty years old when he first met the Prophet, he had already been candidate for the lieutenant-governorship of New York. Upon embracing the gospel he determined, as he puts it, "to quit the folly of my ways, and the fancy and fame of this world."<sup>35</sup>

But to renounce the vanity of the world is more easily said than done, and before half a year had passed Phelps had to be roundly rebuked by the Lord: "And also let my servant

<sup>33</sup>Clark, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup>W. D. Bowen, "The Versatile W. W. Phelps," p. 1.

<sup>35</sup>Bowen, p. 24.



William W. Phelps stand in the office to which I have appointed him . . . And also he hath need to repent, for I, the Lord, am not well pleased with him, for he seeketh to excel, and he is not sufficiently meek before me." (D&C 58:40f.) Phelps was not a man to subordinate himself, and in 1832 the Prophet warns him in a letter to take care lest "they that think they stand should fall."<sup>36</sup> On January 14, 1833, Joseph declared that Phelps represented "the very spirit which is wasting the strength of Zion like a pestilence."<sup>37</sup> W. W. Phelps was a wonderful man, but his weakness was vanity. At the time the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were being produced, the Prophet had to rebuke him again; but things had gone so far that Phelps soon turned against Joseph Smith and went about publicly stirring up trouble, and finally, in November 1838, signed a terrible and damning affidavit against the Prophet.<sup>38</sup> Within two years, however, he confessed that his charges had been lies, and begged to be taken back into the Church again. That took strength of character, and Joseph forgave him freely, as he always forgave his enemies; he knew only too well Phelps's one great fault—"he taketh honor unto himself."<sup>39</sup>

Joseph Smith had a high regard for Phelps's ability. In an encouraging and kindly note to the latter's wife he had written, "His merits, experience, and accomplishments, but few can compete with in this generation."<sup>40</sup> In his literary activities as editor of the *Evening and Morning Star* he was given a free hand: ". . . if the world receive his writings—behold here is wisdom—let him obtain whatsoever he can obtain in righteousness, for the good of the saints." (D&C 57:12.) They were *his* writings, not Joseph's; even when the journal displeased the Prophet, who wrote to Phelps, "If you do not render it more interesting than at present, it will fall . . ." he was left to his own resources.<sup>41</sup> Claiming "a good education which included the Greek and Latin classics," Phelps was quite aware

<sup>36</sup>DHC 1:229, Letter of Joseph Smith to W. W. Phelps, Nov. 27, 1832.

<sup>37</sup>DHC 1:316-7.

<sup>38</sup>The document is given at length in Bowen, pp. 91-93.

<sup>39</sup>B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (6 vols.; Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), Vol. 1, pp. 506f, n. 21 [hereafter referred to as *CHC*]. He gives the exchange of letters between Phelps and Joseph Smith on the occasion. The quotation is from a blessing given to Phelps by the Prophet on Sept. 22, 1835, see Bowen, p. 98.

<sup>40</sup>See note 20.

<sup>41</sup>Bowen, p. 317.



that he was the best educated of the brethren.<sup>42</sup> But his right to be heard extended to matters of revelation as well as scholarship. It was he who gave their grandiloquent titles to the Church leaders—Lion of the Lord, Wild Ram of the Mountains, Archer of Paradise, etc.<sup>42</sup> It was he who on August 9, 1831, saw “the destroyer riding upon the face of the waters.”<sup>43</sup> And he also aspired to making inspired translations of the scriptures. Among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers is a small cloth-bound book inscribed “W. W. Phelps, Diary Vc. 1835,” containing original renderings of the Bible, of which the Church Historian writes: “These passages of Scriptures from the Bible do not appear to have any connection with the Inspired Revision by the Prophet Joseph Smith. This is no doubt the result of research and study done by Wm. W. Phelps.” And why not? Joseph Smith encouraged others to obtain all the gifts that God has bestowed on man. Thus in 1835 the promise was given to Warren Parrish through the mouth of Joseph Smith: “. . . he shall see much of my ancient records, and shall know of hidden things, and shall be endowed with a knowledge of hidden languages; and if he desires and shall seek it at my hands, he shall be privileged with writing much of my word. . . .”<sup>43a</sup> Plainly the right to undertake inspired translation was not limited to Joseph Smith, but was extended to others, in particular the very scribes who produced the Kirtland Egyptian papers.

There was jealousy, too. The situation is illucidated in a revelation of November 1831 (D&C 67): “O ye elders of my church . . . Your eyes have been upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and his language you have known, and his imperfections you have known; you have sought in your hearts knowledge that you might express beyond his language.” The smart men around the Prophet were convinced that they could do a better job than he could in turning out inspired writings. And there were no restraints placed upon them as long as they went about it honestly: “It is your privilege,” nay they receive the *promise* to share the same gifts as Joseph, but only to that degree to which “you strip yourselves from jealousies and fears, and humble yourselves . . . for ye are not sufficiently humble.” (D&C 67:10.) There it is, plain as a pike-staff: the Brethren

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>43a</sup>DHC 2:311f, cited by Jessee in this journal.



were impatient with Joseph Smith's lack of education and desired to improve on his performance; they had every right to do so, and were invited to try, but warned that they would not succeed as long as they were motivated by jealousy. So there is no reason why Cowdery, Phelps, and the others should not have tried their own hands at deciphering Egyptian. Upon receiving the above revelation, "William E. M'Lellin, as the wisest man, in his own estimation, having more learning than sense, endeavored to write a commandment like unto one of the least of the Lord's, but failed."<sup>44</sup> Are not the Kirtland Papers written by men who shared M'Lellin's ambitions? Upon first viewing the papyri, Phelps had written to his wife: "These records of old times, when we translate them and print them in a book, will make a good witness for the Book of Mormon."<sup>45</sup> The editorial "we" here definitely includes himself—the Kirtland Egyptian Papers bear witness that no one tried harder to translate than he did, and there is a note of impatience if not petulance in the letter he wrote the lady six weeks later: "Nothing has been doing in translating of the Egyptian record for a long time, and probably will not for some time to come."<sup>46</sup>

In coming into the Church, Phelps had moved into what had previously been Oliver Cowdery's intellectual domain of editing and writing, and a distinct rivalry between the two can be detected in the Kirtland Papers. Even before the Church was organized Cowdery had sought and been promised the gift of knowing things "concerning the engravings of old records . . . that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred." As always, certain conditions went with the promise, however: ". . . according to your faith shall it be unto you," and "you shall ask with an honest heart." (D&C 8.) That is why "in attempting to exercise this gift of translation . . . Oliver Cowdery failed; and . . . the Lord explained the cause of his failure to translate"—"Behold, you have not understood . . . you took no thought save it was to ask me . . ."<sup>47</sup> Lack of perfect faith and honesty in Cowdery showed itself in the following year, when he had the presumption to write Joseph Smith a letter "'Commanding' him to alter one of the revelations which had

<sup>44</sup>*DHC* 1:225-6.

<sup>45</sup>See note 22.

<sup>46</sup>Bowen, p. 68, Letter of Sept. 11, 1835.

<sup>47</sup>*CHC* 1:132f.



been received.”<sup>48</sup> Soon after that he was told that he had a right to speak by revelation whenever the Comforter led him, but that he was not to compete with the head of the Church in speaking with authority and that his writing was to be “not . . . by way of commandment, but by wisdom.” (D&C 28.) He had as good a right to use his wits as other men, but, like Phelps in his writing and translating, was prone to be carried away by vanity and fall on his face. Each man became increasingly jealous of the Prophet through the year 1837, and both finally had to be cut off from the Church, Cowdery at the autumn conference of 1837,<sup>49</sup> and Phelps in the following summer.<sup>50</sup>

Though he experienced a marvellous manifestation at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in March 1833, Frederick G. Williams “soon after . . . yielded to improper influences” and accordingly on November 7, 1837, was “rejected as a counselor in the First Presidency.” He was not excommunicated until March 17, 1839, however, and was taken back into the Church a year after.<sup>51</sup> During the period of writing the Kirtland Papers, therefore, he was definitely turned against Joseph Smith. As early as 1836 Warren Parrish was found embezzling \$25,000 of the Safety Society Funds, and began operations against President Smith, going about organizing the “Reformers” who went so far as to seize the Temple and declare Joseph Smith a fallen prophet, Parrish had been found “guilty of sexual sin in Kirtland,” but “made confession to the church, and on promising reformation retained his standing.” He was not cut off from the Church until early 1838, when he became one of Joseph Smith’s bitterest enemies; he never returned to the Church.<sup>52</sup> Thus the man who worked most closely with Phelps in turning out the Kirtland Egyptian Papers was one of those most strongly animated at the time by feelings of ambition, jealousy, and guilt.

Willard Richards, who did not even join the Church before 1837, was the one and only writer of Kirtland Egyptian Papers to remain true; and when the others left he took charge of what papers were available. It is significant that though as “keeper of the records” he was in charge of all official documents,

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<sup>48</sup>CHC 1:217.

<sup>49</sup>CHC 1:431-4.

<sup>50</sup>DHC 3:46.

<sup>51</sup>A. Jensen, LDS Biographical Encyclopedia (1901), 1:51.

<sup>52</sup>CHC 1:404-406; DHC 2: 528.



the papers designated as "Egyptian Grammar" were kept not with the others in the iron-bound box which Elder Richards risked his life to save during a flash flood while crossing the plains, but were stored away by themselves in the trunk of his wife Jennetta.<sup>53</sup> This alone puts them in a special category apart from the official documents of the Church, laid aside and never in any sense proclaimed official. He didn't have all the papers, however; all along the Prophet had been more interested in dictating his own History to these same men than having them work on the Book of Abraham, and when they left him they took their work with them: "Twice Joseph had attempted to have his history recorded and published," yet "in each case an apostate scribe had refused to surrender a partly prepared manuscript."<sup>54</sup> The important B. of A. Ms. # 1, by Phelps was never among the papers that passed from Willard Richards to his nephew Franklin D. Richards, but was acquired by the Church in 1947 through the late Wilford Wood. The scribe apparently considered that he had a right to the thing as his own work.

#### ANOTHER TENTATIVE SUMMARY

The men who cooperated, more or less, to produce the Kirtland Papers were impatient of Joseph Smith's scholarly limitations and were at the same time invited by him to surpass them. In dealing with these men, the Prophet showed superhuman forbearance, freely forgiving them all their terrible offenses against him and inviting them back into the Church even when they did not ask it. In their literary work he gave them a free hand, sharing his idea with them, and letting them make what use they pleased of his words. They were the "aspiring spirits," the "great big Elders . . . who cause him much trouble"; after he taught them in private councils, they would then go forth into the world and proclaim the things he had taught them, as their own revelations."<sup>55</sup> But still he put up with them, encouraging them to work along with him and improve his English.

<sup>53</sup>According to the official "Schedule of Church Records. Nauvoo 1846," drawn up by Thomas Bullock for Willard Richards at the time of the exodus from Nauvoo. The story of the iron-bound box is dramatically recounted by C. Noall, *Intimate Disciple, A Portrait of Willard Richards* (Univ. of Utah Press, 1957), p. 489.

<sup>54</sup>Noall, p. 306.

<sup>55</sup>*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph F. Smith, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1942), p. 225.



Now when these men turned against Joseph Smith at the very time that they were working on the Egyptian Papers, they all started making public statements and signing affidavits in which they did their best to invent the most damning and withering charges they could to make the Prophet an object of ridicule and contempt as well as loathing in men's eyes. Phelps, Cowdery, and Williams all admitted later that the charges were fabrications; but why at that time did not one of them, including the bitter Parrish, so much as even hint at the fiasco of the Egyptian translations? Because there was no fiasco: the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were as much their baby as Smith's, but no matter who was responsible for them they contained nothing reprehensible, since no claims either of divine inspiration or of scholarly accuracy were made for them. The freedom of expression displayed by the various copyists shows plainly enough that the work was considered experimental.

Here we see the brethren, with the encouragement of the Prophet, casting about for suggestions and ideas, a course that was often recommended to them by the voice of revelation. Before God gives us the answer he expects us to be diligent seekers, even as Abraham was (Abr. 2:12): "... we never enquire at the hand of God for special revelation," said Joseph Smith, "only in case of there being no previous revelation to suit the case . . . it is a great thing to enquire at the hands of God . . . and we feel fearful to approach Him . . . especially about things the knowledge of which men ought to obtain, in all sincerity, before God, for themselves, in humility and by the prayer of faith . . ." <sup>56</sup> The brother of Jared, at the Lord's suggestion, attempted to produce a flameless light for his ships. He worked like a demon, exercising all his faith, ingenuity, and strength, and the result was a fiasco! In words of total self-abasement he announced his humiliating failure and confessed his helplessness, begging the Lord to take over where he had failed. And at that point—but not a moment before—God did take over (Ether 2:22-3:6). Even the mighty Brother of Jared had to learn by that mortifying but highly effective process of trial and error which is the essence of our time of probation here on earth.

We should not let the element of the fantastic in the Kirtland Papers prejudice us too much against them. The history of Egyptology is largely a story of the fantastic. Aside from

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 22.



the nature of the material, every Egyptologist must indulge in some pretty wild guessing from time to time if he hopes for any fruitful breakthroughs—usually, the greater the scholar the more bold and original the guessing. The bad guesses, of course, don't get published; usually they are quietly and mercifully forgotten and never held against their perpetrators. We are not much interested in the thousands of times that Edison was wrong, but in the hundreds of times he was right. In the case of Joseph Smith the attitude of the critics has always been the reverse of this. But no man knew better than he that it is by our mistakes that we are admonished, humbled, and enlightened.

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers, we submit, represent that mandatory preliminary period of investigation and exploration during which men are required to "study it out in your mind" (D&C 9:8), making every effort to "obtain for themselves" whatever can be so obtained, thereby discovering and acknowledging their own limitations, before asking for direct revelation from on high. There were at least three separate experiments or approaches, none of which as far as we can see at present, contributed anything to the Book of Abraham. Specifically, (1) the Book of Abraham was *not* derived from the "Alphabet" writings, which only got as far as Beta—the second letter; (2) it was *not* derived from or by means of the "Grammar," which never got beyond the first page and a half; (3) it was *not* translated from the first two lines of the Joseph Smith Papyrus No. XI—the Book of Breathings," for reasons indicated above. These three projects were separate undertakings, each dealing with different materials from the others and in a different way. The three exercises can be regarded as experiments which were dropped before any of them got very far—laid aside and wisely kept out of circulation, for such things could easily be misinterpreted by malicious minds.

To those who ask, as many do, from what particular Egyptian manuscript the Book of Abraham was translated? the answer is, that we do not know. The eleven fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri in our possession are only a portion of the original collection. But when in 1842 the Prophet at Nauvoo describes himself as "translating from the Records of Abraham," we can be sure that it was *not* the Book of Breathings to which he was referring, that having been dropped for good as the Kirtland Papers show, way back in 1837.



All proper investigation moves from the known to the unknown, and whatever was definitely known the brethren of Kirtland were willing to embrace—they made valiant efforts to come to grips with Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and German; but in their day nothing was known about Egyptian. What were they to do? They had nothing to go on but intuition, and they gave it a try. They had an excellent excuse for not getting involved in the mysteries of an unknown language, but still they tried their hand at a number of approaches, because you never know, and because they had been invited by revelation to do so—God knew perfectly well that the Brother of Jared would fall on his face, that was part of the plan. But we today are a different situation; we have enormous advantages which the men of Kirtland did not have, and the firm and relentless thrusting in our faces of the newly rediscovered Joseph Smith Papyri is a reminder that we now are under the same obligation they were under to exhaust all the available resources. Those resources are indeed formidable and should test the skill and dedication of LDS scholars to the limit. So far, though they have hardly been touched, they promise wonderful things.

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers were a milestone, now left far behind. The follies of 1912 were another, in which Joseph Smith's critics showed *their* limitations to the world. There will be other milestones, but the lesson of each will be the same, namely, that the more diligently we seek, the better right we have to ask.

What emerges most clearly from a closer look at the Kirtland Egyptian Papers is the fact that there is nothing official or final about them—they are fluid, exploratory, confidential, and hence free of any possibility or intention of fraud or deception. Strangely enough, though they seem to express a free play of fancy they are not all pure nonsense. For example, Joseph Smith's discussion of the "Alphabet," strangely reminiscent of the Rabbi Akiba's alphabet, reads like a very up-to-date analysis of the basic ideas of Egyptian religion and kingship; and there are so many happy guesses about the meanings of symbols that one begins to wonder whether they can all be purely accidental or fanciful; after all, the Book of Abraham itself is far from nonsense. All these things, however, must be the subject of other and more careful studies.