

THE FACSIMILE FOUND :

THE RECOVERY OF JOSEPH SMITH'S PAPYRUS MANUSCRIPTS

The L.D.S. Church has received part of a collection of papyrus manuscripts which had generally been presumed lost for more than 100 years. These eleven papyri, presented to the First Presidency by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and now being examined at Brigham Young University, include the drawing Joseph Smith published as Facsimile No. 1 of the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, as well as other drawings which are much like certain figures in Facsimiles No. 2 and No. 3 and others referred to by Oliver Cowdery as part of the "Book of Joseph." DIALOGUE has through independent sources obtained photographs of all eleven papyri and a copy of the accompanying letter of sale by Emma Smith Bidamon; some of these are reproduced in connection with the following interviews: first, Glen Wade, a member of the Church who teaches electrical engineering at the University of California at Santa Barbara, reports on his efforts to find out about the rumored existence of the papyri over the past six months and on a conversation he recently had with Professor Aziz S. Atiya of the University of Utah, who helped recover the papyri. Then there follows the transcript of an interview with Dr. Henry G. Fischer, Curator of the Egyptian Collection at the Metropolitan Museum where the papyri have been since 1947, conducted by Norman Tolk, Lecturer in Physics at Columbia and a member of DIALOGUE's Board of Editors, and three other interested Mormons from the Manhattan Ward: Lynn Travers, an editor and free-lance writer for Harcourt, Brace and World and president of the YWMIA; George D. Smith, Jr., an investment counselor and instructor of the Mutual Study Class; and F. Charles Graves, a graduate student in educational administration at Columbia and first counselor in the ward bishopric.

A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR ATIYA

Dr. Aziz S. Atiya, the discoverer of the famed *Codex Arabicus* and a number of other archaeological treasures of antiquity, regards his finding of the Joseph Smith papyri as one of his most gratifying experiences. It was in the latter part of May,

1966, when Professor Atiya was doing research for his new book, *History of Eastern Christianity*, that he made the discovery. A member of the Coptic Church (Egyptian Christian Church) and a careful student of its ancient history, he was checking through files of papyrus manuscripts at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in search of Coptic material. He came upon eleven papyrus sheets which instantly held his attention. The writing was hieroglyphic and hieratic, dating back to the era 500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. and obviously having no bearing on his research, but nevertheless, something caught his eye. The first of the eleven sheets, somewhat fragmented and with portions missing, contained a vignette showing three figures: a man on a couch, a standing man nearby, and a bird in mid-air. Dr. Atiya immediately recognized the original of Facsimile No. 1 in the Pearl of Great Price.

I recently spent a delightful afternoon at Professor Atiya's house near the University of Utah campus, and heard him describe his experience. I had previously expressed interest in his find and he had invited me to pay him a visit. Mrs. Taza A. Peirce, executive secretary of Salt Lake City's Council of International Visitors, was invited also, and we enjoyed the gracious hospitality of Dr. and Mrs. Atiya as we discussed the details of what had happened.

Dr. Atiya explained that it was the standing man in the vignette which had first attracted his attention (see page 49). The original head was missing, but the damaged papyrus sheet had been glued to a sheet of nineteenth century paper and a drawing of a head had been penciled in. It was this fact and the appearance of the head which caused Dr. Atiya to realize that he was looking at one of the Mormon papyri. Although not a member of the Church, Dr. Atiya for many years had cherished his Latter-day Saint friends and is well informed about Church beliefs. He is aware of the history of the papyri and their relationship to the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price and is acquainted with the three facsimiles.

It took little time to verify the authenticity of the find. The file containing the papyrus manuscripts also contained a letter signed by Emma Smith Bidamon, widow of the Prophet, showing that Joseph Smith was once their owner.¹

The Metropolitan Museum was certainly aware not only of the existence

¹Following is an exact copy of the letter:

Nauvoo City May 26/56

This certifies that we have sold to Mr. A. Combs four Egyptian Mummies with the records of them. This Mummies were obtained from the catacombs of Egypt sixty feet below the surface of the Earth. by the antiquaritan society of Paris & forwarded to New York & purchased by the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith at the price of twenty four hundred dollars in the year eighteen hundred thirty five they were highly prized by Mr. Smith on account of the importance which attached to the record which were accidentally found enclosed in the breast of one of the Mummies. from translations by Mr. Smith of the Records. these Mummies were found to be the family of Pharo King of Egypt. they were kept exclusively by Mr. Smith until his death & since by the Mother of Mr. Smith notwithstanding we have had repeated offers to purchase which have invariably been refused until her death which occurred on the fourteenth day of this month

[signed]

L.C. Bidamon

Nauvoo

Hancock Co. Ill May 26

Emma Bidamon [pencil:] former wife of Jos. Smith

Joseph Smith [pencil:] son of Jos. Smith

of these papyri in their files, but, because of the letter, that they had a connection with the Mormon Church. Why then did it take so many years for these fragments to come to the attention of the Church? We can only assume that the Museum did not understand their intrinsic value to Mormonism. Dr. Atiya did.

Dr. Atiya obtained photographs of the material in the file and returned to his home in Salt Lake City. He immediately got in touch with his good Mormon friend, Taza Peirce, and told her in confidence what he had discovered. A few days later the two of them met with President N. Eldon Tanner and the photographs were displayed. Later, the photographs were sent to Brigham Young University for inspection by Professor Hugh Nibley, who confirmed that the papyri were from the Mormon collection.

Dr. Atiya felt strongly that this collection, having such significance to the Church, should now be back in the hands of the Church. He was aware that arranging for a transfer of ownership might involve delicate negotiations and that he could play a role in bringing about such a transfer. His approach included avoiding publicity at all costs. Only Mrs. Peirce had been told of the actual location of the papyri, and she kept the secret well. In the course of the next year and a half, Dr. Atiya made seven trips to New York City and numerous telephone calls to the museum. He first suggested to museum officials that an exchange of gifts might be appropriate, the Church giving to the museum an object of art and antiquity in return for the papyrus pieces. The museum officials soon agreed that the proper home for the collection was with the Church and that even an exchange of gifts would be unnecessary. Nevertheless, the negotiations took substantial time. Finally, in September, 1967, Professor Atiya received a letter from Dr. Henry G. Fischer, Curator of the Egyptian Collection of the museum, agreeing to the transfer. At mid-day on Monday, November 27, 1967, in a special ceremony at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art the eleven papyrus pieces, along with the letter, were presented to President Tanner as a gift of the museum to the Church.

In addition to the papyrus itself, Dr. Atiya pointed out that the paper on which the papyrus had been mounted might also be of interest to Church scholars.² All eleven pieces originally had been part of a papyrus roll. The roll had been cut into separate pieces by the Prophet, or by an associate, and glued to the paper. Professor Atiya said there were notes in Joseph Smith's handwriting on three of the paper sheets. Presumably, Joseph Smith had also made the penciled sketch of the head on the standing figure in the first vignette. The notes on the paper included a mapped area and a citation of townships.

Taza Peirce told me that the collection of eleven pieces is by no means all the

²This refers to a previously unknown map of Nauvoo on which Joseph Smith apparently mounted the pieces of papyri. T. Edgar Lyon, Research Historian for Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., feels that recovery of this map may be one of the most valuable results of obtaining the papyri. [ed.]

papyri the Church initially owned. It is believed that thirty pieces were originally cut from the roll. Nineteen therefore are still missing and remain out of Church hands.

The papyri were initially found with a group of Egyptian mummies which the Prophet purchased from Michael H. Chandler in 1835 in Kirtland, Ohio. Joseph Smith stated that the papyri contained the writings of Abraham and of Joseph. From the papyri he proceeded to translate the set of scriptures known as the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price. Although the Church continued to possess the papyri for some years after 1835, eventually they were lost and were thought by historians to have been destroyed in the Chicago fire.

The possible existence of the papyri has been a matter of speculation for some time. At a meeting I attended in the Tustin Ward Chapel of Santa Ana, California, on August 11, 1967, Professor Hugh Nibley stated that the papyrus text for the Book of Abraham and the Book of Joseph were not destroyed in the fire but were still in existence. He indicated that he personally did not know their location or ownership but that he was quite certain of their preservation. In a later conversation, Henry Lutz, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology at the University of California, suggested to me that Dr. John A. Wilson of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago might know something about the papyri. I wrote a letter of inquiry to Professor Wilson and received the following reply:

The University of Chicago
The Oriental Institute
August 31, 1967

Professor Glen Wade
Department of Electrical Engineering
University of California
Santa Barbara, California 93106

Dear Professor Wade:

In my book, *Signs and Wonders upon Pharaoh* (University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 38, I wrote:

"Nine years after these pieces had been bought, there was an attack on the Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo, Illinois. . . . the Egyptian pieces were carried off to a museum in Chicago, according to the story. When the great fire swept that city in 1871, these texts with their curious history were allegedly destroyed."

As I had originally framed that statement, I did not use the words "according to the story" and "allegedly." I followed the published account. Then I was told verbally and in confidence that they were still in existence, recently bought by an American museum from a private source. I have been asked not to reveal their present location, and I have to keep my word on that. Thus I cannot suggest to you how you can secure more definite information.

Sincerely yours,
[signed]
John A. Wilson
Professor of Egyptology

JAW/es

Whether or not Professor Wilson was referring to the pieces later discovered by Dr. Atiya, I do not know. I suspect he was. If so, the American museum to which he referred was the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. The private