

“That Is the Handwriting of Abraham”

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IN HIS STIMULATING ARTICLE “Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator” (DIALOGUE, Winter 1989), Karl Sandberg seeks to explain the Prophet Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Abraham almost exclusively in terms of seership (where one does not necessarily actually view the material being deciphered, as opposed to using prophetic gifts to bring to light what was previously hidden or unknown). While such an explanation possibly provides important insights into the Prophet Joseph’s methodology in preparing the Book of Abraham for publication, it clearly fails to explain or even address several relatively well-known incidents in the Prophet’s life which strongly suggest that he *did* purport to translate (in the traditional sense) the writings on the papyri from their original language into English and that he considered the ongoing physical examination of the papyri an important part of translation.

Perhaps the best known example of the Prophet’s proclaimed intent in this regard is his preparation over a number of years of what he termed his *Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar*. In commenting about the work, BYU professor James R. Clark noted: “It is hard to understand why Joseph Smith bothered to compile or use this *Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar* in the first place if his transaction [*sic*] was a word for word direct revelation” (1955, 102). The book is a ruled journal approximately 8 x 12 inches in length and width, labeled *Egyptian Alphabet* on the outside spine (Clark 1955, 100). Sidney B. Sperry commented about the quantity of material contained in the book: “One of the things that strikes me about this whole business is the importance of our discovery, some 30 years ago, of *Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar*. When we first opened it we found numerous pages of Egyptian material. . . . There must be a hundred times more material in this volume than there is in the whole Pearl of Great Price” (1968, 8).

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Although Sperry's reference to the quantity of material in the *Grammar* was probably not meant to be taken literally, it certainly does indicate that the Prophet produced a very large body of written notes and materials as he prepared the Book of Abraham and the *Grammar*.

During the period he worked on the books, from at least 5 July 1835 to 9 March 1842 and possibly even longer, there is no evidence that Joseph Smith used seerstones.¹ In his diary entry for 5 July 1835, he recorded:

Soon after this, some of the Saints at Kirtland purchased the mummies and papyrus, a description of which will appear hereafter, and with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, etc., a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to *examine* or unfold them. (HC 2:236, emphasis added)

Joseph also wrote in July 1835: "The remainder of this month I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients" (HC 2:238). On 1 October 1835, he noted: "This afternoon I labored on the Egyptian alphabet, in company with Brothers Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps, and during the research, the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients unfolded to our understanding, the particulars of which will appear hereafter" (HC 2:286).

Although Joseph had already published a portion of the Book of Abraham in the 1 March 1842 issue of the *Times and Seasons* (HC 4:542), he recorded the following on 9 March 1842: "Examining copy of the *Times and Seasons* . . . in the morning; in the afternoon continued the translation of the Book of Abraham, called at Bishop Knight's and Mr. Davis', with the recorder, and continued translating and revising, reading letters in the evening, Sister Emma being present in the office" (HC 4:548).

The *Grammar* Joseph prepared as he translated the papyri is an almost scholarly work which contains many pages of specific grammatical symbols and rules. For example, the Prophet made the following comment about a symbol he had translated as "Beth (Ba-eth)":

This character is in the first degree. It has an arbitrary sound or signification which is Beth; and also a compound sound which is Za and comprises one simple

¹ In contrast, the Prophet translated and filed for the copyright on the Book of Mormon (which contained some 588 printed pages in the 1830 edition) which he translated using the Urim and Thummim, in the period between 22 September 1827 (see Joseph Smith-History 1:59) and 11 June 1829 (HC 1:58).

sentence for its signification. It is only increased or lessened in its signification by its connection with other characters. One connection with another character gives it a compound signification, or enlarges the sentence. Two connections increases the signification still. Three increases it still; four increases still and five still. This is as far as a sentence can be carried in the first degree. In its arbitrary sound it may have more sounds than one, but cannot have more than five sounds. When it is compounded with others, it can only have one sound. Every character in this alphabet is subject to the above restrictions." (in Clark 1955, 105)

In addition, it appears that Joseph Smith believed some of the papyri themselves contained the *actual* writings of ancient patriarchs. In May 1844, just forty-three days before his martyrdom, the Prophet entertained in Nauvoo Josiah Quincy, a member of the famous Quincy family of Massachusetts and soon-to-be mayor of Boston. During that visit, which so impressed Quincy that he wrote an unusually favorable report about the Prophet which is often cited by the Church as evidence of the Prophet's good character and personal magnetism (see CHC 2:349-50), Joseph Smith showed Quincy the mummies and the papyri. Quincy reported about the visit: "Some parchments inscribed with hieroglyphics were then offered us. They were preserved under glass and handled with great respect. 'That is the handwriting of Abraham, the father of the Faithful,' said the prophet. 'This is the autograph of Moses, and these lines were written by his brother Aaron. Here we have the earliest account of the creation from which Moses composed the First Book of Genesis' " (1883, 386).

Unless Karl Sandberg can explain how the above references can be woven into his hypothesis, it is difficult to see how his explanation alone provides a complete answer to how Joseph Smith brought forth the Book of Abraham.

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