Joseph Smith's Identification of "Abraham" in Papyrus JS 1, the "Breathing Permit of Hôr"

Edward H. Ashment

> *There,. . . that is the signature of the patriarch Abraham.*
> —Joseph Smith, in *The Quincy Whig*, 17 Oct 1840

IN THE "EGYPTIAN ALPHABET" MANUSCRIPT that he himself wrote,[1] Joseph Smith transcribed Egyptian characters from the text of Papyrus JS 1, the

---

1. Four "Egyptian Alphabet" manuscripts survive:
   - **EA JS**, written by Joseph Smith, with additions by Oliver Cowdery and Warren Parrish;
   - **EA OC**, written by Oliver Cowdery, with an entry by Warren Parrish;
   - **EA WWP**, written by W. W. Phelps, with an entry by Warren Parrish; and
   - **GAEL** ("Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language"), written by W. W. Phelps, with additions by Warren Parrish.
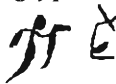
EA JS, EA OC, and EA WWP appear to have been written at the same time. All the manuscripts contain slight differences, indicating how they relate to each other. For example EA JS originally lacks "Zub-sool-oan" (in addition to lexemes for four other characters), unlike EA OC and EA WWP. (Cowdery added those lexemes to Smith's manuscript, and Phelps's entry was the corrected, final version.) Likewise, EA JS lacks an interpretation for the penultimate character in the manuscript while both of the other manuscripts have it. Conversely, EA OC lacks an interpretation for the last character transcribed into all three EA manuscripts, *ʃ*, while EA JS and EA WWP both include it although largely crossed out with Cowdery entering a more elaborate interpretation on the back of the last page of EA JS.

Thus, evidence indicates that Smith's EA was the original, which means that it was Smith who established the methodology for decipherment in the Egyptian Alphabet documents. Cowdery added final touches to Smith's manuscript while not finishing his own. Phelps's manuscript did not include the more elaborate interpretation of the last character. Except for the entry by Parrish, Cowdery apparently was the last to write on the EA manuscripts.

Among other things, the GAEL incorporated the more elaborate interpretation of *ʃ* as part of its original text, indicating that it was written later than the EA manuscripts. As is the case with the EA manuscripts, Parrish's entries in the GAEL were added later. See

Breathing Permit of Hôr,[2] and recorded his transliterations and interpretations for many of them. In the course of his efforts, he connected disparate hieroglyphic and hieratic characters with Abraham.

PAPYRUS JS 1.1

From line 2 of pJS 1.1 Smith transcribed two hieroglyphic characters,

, into his "Egyptian Alphabet" manuscript as . He identified the left-hand character as "Ah broam—ah-brah oam Ki Abrah oam."[3] Following Smith's original identifications, was transcribed as and divided into constituent elements in the Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language (GAEL 3); and the ʃ element from Smith's original was represented as the lexeme "Kiahbroam." In its various "degrees,"[4] its purported interpretations were:

> [Fifth Degree] Kiahbrahoam. Coming down from the beginning—right by birth—and also by blessing, and by promise—promises made; a father of many nations; a prince of peace; one who keeps the commandment of God; a patriarch; a rightful heir; a high priest (GAEL 3).
>
> [Fourth Degree] Kiahbroam. Change from the first; by coming from the beginning by right of birth or lineage (GAEL 9).

Edward H. Ashment, "Reducing Dissonance: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study," *The Word of God*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 232-23.

2. Nibley's fragments I, XI, and X. Instead of Nibley's arbitrary enumeration of the various papyrus fragments (see *Improvement Era* [February 1968]: 40-40i), a more accurate system has been adopted here:

- Papyrus JS 1, *Breathing Permit of Hôr*
- Papyrus JS 2, *Book of the Dead of Ta-sherit-Min*, comprised of Nibley's originally-designated fragments IX (now pJS 2.1), VII (now pJS 2.2), VIII (now pJS 2.3), V (now pJS 2.4), VI (now pJS 2.5), IV (now pJS 2.6), and II (now pJS 2.7);
- Papyrus JS 3, *Book of the Dead* 125 vignette of Nefer-ir-nebu, comprised of Nibley's originally-designated fragment III;
- Papyrus JS 4, fragments of the *Book of the Dead of Amunhotep, son of Nai-neb*, now lost, with only 19th-Century facsimiles remaining; and
- Hypocephalus JS, a hypocephalus for Shishak, now lost, with only a 19th-Century facsimile remaining.

3. Smith's "Ah broam—ah-brah oam Ki Abrah oam" were crossed out and, in Oliver Cowdery's handwriting, were replaced by "Ki-Ah-bram, Ki-ah-bra-oam—Zub-sool-oan." (In EA WWP, Phelps spelled the last word as "Zub zool oan.") GAEL 3 indicates that the right-hand character, ε , was left untransliterated.

4. Joseph Smith himself introduced the "degree" system of interpretation in his own

> ∫ [Third Degree] Kiahbroam. First reckoned in chronol=ogy = coming down from the beginning First born right or blessings (GAEL 13).

> ∫ [Second Degree] Kiahbroam. = Coming down from the beginning. To some place or fixed period, the first in lineage, or right in lineage (GAEL16).

> ∫ [First Degree] KiAhbroam. That which goes before, until another time, or a change by appointment, The first, faithful, or father, or fathers. (GAEL 20)

An obvious question is whether or not Smith's identifications and interpretations are unique to him; i.e., whether or not they can be corroborated egyptologically. Unfortunately, they cannot. 𓁷𓃭 (more clearly 𓁹𓅱𓐍) simply is a man's name, ‹zir-wr,[5] and means "Osiris is great."[6] The characters have no phonetic or semantic connection to Smith's "Ki Abrah oam" or to "Zub-sool-oan."

PAPYRUS JS 1.2

From the beginning of column 1, line 1 of pJS 1.2, Smith transcribed the (now badly damaged) hieratic characters, 𓏲 , as in EA JS, which he then crossed out, 𓂀 . Directly underneath, he again wrote the first

---

"Egyptian Alphabet" manuscript (EA JS) by dividing the characters into groups, which he called "parts" of the "first degree." This system was followed in the other EA manuscripts.

The "degree" system enabled Smith to interpret "verbs, participles-prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs" into a given character in one level or "degree" and then do it all over again in another "degree" until "the full sense of the writer is. . .conveyed." Thus, up to "625" possible "significations" per character could be created (GAEL 1f).

5. Klaus Baer, "The Breathing Permit of Hôr: A Translation of the Apparent Source of the Book of Abraham," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 117. See Marc Coenen, "The Dating of the Papyri Joseph Smith I, X, and XI [i.e., pJS 1; see note 2 above] and Min Who Massacres His Enemies," *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years*, Part II, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 85 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 1998), 1103-1115. Coenen notes that "The latest possible dating for P. Joseph Smith I, X and XI [i.e., pJS 1; see note 2 above] is in our opinion the first half of the second century BC. Therefore, this text is the oldest Book of Breathings that can be dated" (1111). See also M. Coenen and J. Quaegegbeur, *Het Boek van het Ademen van Isis of De Papyrus Denon in het Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum, Den Haag*, Monografieën van het Boek 5 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1995), 36-44.

6. See Hermann Ranke, *Die ägyptischen Personennamen* 1 (Glückstadt: Verlag von J. J. Augustin, 1935), 84.23; Erich Lüddeckens et al., *Demotisches Namenbuch* 1, fasc. 2 (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1981), 124; and W. Erichsen, *Demotisches Glossar* (Kopenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1954), 100.

character, $\mathcal{L}$, and under that the second, f. Smith identified f as "Ah-bra-oam." He crossed that out and replaced it with the caretted "Ah-broam." Smith wrote that the sign "Signifies father of the faithful The first right—The elder." All but "The elder" was crossed out, and on the back of the page the sign and a more elaborate explanation (according to the "degree" system[7]) was recorded in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery:

In the first degree Ah-broam—signifies The father of the faithful, the first right, the elder—second degree—same sound—A follower of sig righteous-ness—Third degree—same sound—one who possesses great knowledge—Fourth degree—same sound—A follower of righteousness, a possessor of greater knowledge. Fifth degree—Ah-bra-oam. The father of many nations, a prince of peace, one who keeps the command=ments of God, a patriarch, a rightful heir, a high priest.

Conformably, the Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language, or-ganized into sections by "degree," and beginning with the "Fifth De-gree," interprets
as:

[Fifth Degree] Ah brah-oam: a father of many nations a prince of peace, One who keeps the commandments of God. A patriarch a rightful heir, a highpriest (GAEL 2)

[Fourth Degree] Ahbroam: a follower of righteousness a possessor of greater knowledge—(GAEL 9)

[Third Degree] Ah-broam: one who possesses great knowl[e]dge (GAEL 13)

[Second Degree] Ah=brah-hoam—Ah broam: a follower of right-eousness (GAEL 16)

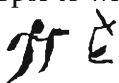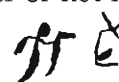[First Degree] Ah=brah hoam: the Father of the faithful. The first right—the elder (GAEL 20)

The connection of f with Abraham persisted in Book of Abraham Manuscript 2,[8] where it refers specifically to Abraham. Moreover, there

---

7. See note 4.
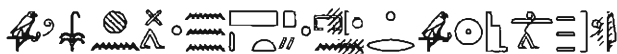8. The relative chronology of the Book of Abraham manuscripts has been established:
• BAbr Ms 1a, in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams, BAbr Folder 2;
• BAbr Ms 1b, in the handwriting of Warren Parrish, BAbr Folder 3;
• BAbr Ms 2, begun by W. W. Phelps and completed (incorporating the correc-tions from mss. 1a and 1b) by Warren Parrish, BAbr Folder 1; and

are many reports of Smith pointing out the "handwriting" and "signature" of Abraham to people to whom he showed the papyri.[9]

As is the case with 𝑓𝑓 𝐿̀ , an obvious question is whether or not Smith's identification of 𝑓 is unique; i.e., whether or not it can be corroborated Egyptologically. Unfortunately, as with 𝑓𝑓 𝐿̀ , it cannot.

A parallel Breathing Permit reveals that the characters 〉 ⊢ originally were part of a three-character group: ⅜𝑓 .[10] Unfortunately, the third sign in the first line of the first column of pJS 1.2 already was missing in a lacuna when Smith worked on his "Egyptian Alphabet"[11] although, near the end of line three of the papyrus, the same sign group appears in its entirety: ⅜𝔩 .[12]

Restored Egyptologically,[13] line 1 reads as follows:

In BAbr Ms 2 this line (albeit with Smith's hypothetically "restored" characters for what is missing in the lacuna) was "translated" into more

---

• BAbr Ms 3, the printer's manuscript in the handwriting of Willard Richards, BAbr Folder 4.

"In Reducing Dissonance: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study" (in *The Word of God*, ed. Dan Vogel [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990], 221-235) I had accepted Dean C. Jessee's identification of W. W. Phelps as the scribe for BAbr Ms 1a. However, see now the forthcoming revision of Edward H. Ashment, *The Papyrus Which Has Lived*, chap. 2, "Some Ancient Records That Have Fallen into Our Hands" (1986).

9. See Ashment, Some Ancient Records That Have Fallen into Our Hands, s.v. "Interim" and "Nauvoo Period."

10. P.-J. de Horrack, "Le livre de respirations [pLouvre 3284]," *Bibliothèque Égyptologique* 17 (1907): plate 11, §14b, line 1.

11. Hypothetical characters were supplied for the lacuna in the BAbr manuscripts. See Edward H. Ashment, "A Record in the Language of My Father: Evidence of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew in the Book of Mormon," *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 335f. The first character (i.e., on the right-hand side) of Figure 4 in that essay is Smith's "Ki Abrah oam" (𝑓𝑓) from pJS 1:1, line 2. It was used—out of context—in BAbr Ms 2 as a "restored" character to help fill the lacuna in pJS 1:2, column 1, line 1. "Translated," it became part of Smith's Book of Abraham as chapter 1, verses 2-3. Note that the "translation" closely resembles the interpretations in EA JS and GAEL, provided above.

12. Baer, The Breathing Permit of Hôr, 129.

13. See de Horrack, plate 11, §14b, lines 1-2.

than 870 words, as Book of Abraham 1:1-19. Egyptologically, however, the line is transliterated as *iw.[w stȝ Wsir r-ẖn]w pȝ*[14] *š wr*[15] *Ḫnsw* and translated into a mere 10 words: "Osiris shall be hauled into this great pool of Khonsu."[16]

Worse, the sign that Smith identified with Abraham, *ʃ* , is nothing more than the hieratic version of $\mathcal{9}$ —a "w" in Egyptian.[17] It has no phonetic or semantic relationship to his "Ah–broam."

It is therefore no wonder that apologists for Joseph Smith as a translator are so anxious to divorce him from

1) the "Egyptian Alphabet" manuscripts—a futile attempt, since one was in his own handwriting and the remainder followed his lead; and

2) Book of Abraham manuscripts 1a, 1b, and 2, which were simply scribal copies of his dictated "translation."[18]

---

14. Following pLouvre 3284. In personal correspondence, Robert K. Ritner notes that he reads the dot after r-Xnw in pJS 1.2 line 1 as an n, "following contemporary Demotic paleography," which results in the compound preposition: r-Xnw n, "into"; for which see r-Xnw (n) in Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute,1962), 202, s.v. Xnw. See also Wb 3:370.15, and r-Xn(n) in Janet H. Johnson, ed., *The Demotic Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2001), s.v. Xn.

15. Written as py. The second character (Gardiner Sign List, Z4) is a write-over in darker ink, as is the case with other characters on pJS 1, and only traces of the original sign remain. It appears unlikely that the original was an A; although, in pLouvre 3284 the word is written as pA. In personal correspondence, Robert K. Ritner observes that py is a rather common Ptolemaic variant of pAy; hence, he understands py as p(A)y, "this"—an emendation that preserves the y.

16. Literally, "They shall haul Osiris. . . ." See Baer, The Breathing Permit of Hôr, 119. See also Ashment, Reducing Dissonance. For discussions of the Third Future, see Friedrich Junge, *Neuägyptisch: Einführung in die Grammatik* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 131; Jarosalv Cerny and Sarah Israelit Groll, *A Late Egyptian Grammar*, 4th ed., *Studia Pohl: Series Maior* 4 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1993), 248-264. For ✕ as wr, see Gardiner's Sign List, Z9 (6); *Wb* 1:326; François Daumas, *Valeurs phonétiques des signes hiéroglyphiques d'époque Greco-Romaine* 4 (Montpellier: Publications de la recherche–Université de Montpellier, 1995), 829.

17. See Georg Möller, *Hieratische Paläographie* 3 (1936; reprint, Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1965), 18.200b.

18. See Ashment, Reducing Dissonance.