

Denver Snuffer Podcast 178: Book of Abraham, Part 1

This is the first part of a series on the Book of Abraham, where Denver uses the text of the Book of Abraham itself to provide powerful proof of its authenticity.

DENVER: After Melchizedek, an apostasy lasted until Abraham. Although he was raised by an idolater and lamented that his fathers offered sacrifices to idols, Abraham searched for the true God of Heaven. Abraham **found** God, and the covenant of the first Fathers was renewed and conferred upon him by Melchizedek. Generations of apostates were excluded from the Holy Order, but Abraham was adopted into the line by Melchizedek, thereby restoring continuity **back** to Adam.

Abraham represents the key Patriarchal Father prophesied of in Malachi. Abraham not only renews the covenant of “the fathers” (**including** Noah and Enoch), but also through the Abrahamic covenant, God established Abraham as the new head of the family of God on Earth. God told Abraham: *As many as receive this gospel shall be called after your name and shall be accounted your seed, and shall rise up and bless you, as unto their Father* (Abraham 3:1 RE). For us, connecting to Abraham is akin to the original Patriarchs’ connection to Adam. Turning the heart of the children to the Fathers is a required part of the gospel. And after God’s covenant with him, salvation for all subsequent generations is dependent on being accounted Abraham’s seed.

The covenant with Abraham was renewed with Isaac, who also became the Patriarchal head and husbandman-father of the faithful. Believers thereafter likewise are numbered as Isaac’s “seed” through the renewal and extension of the covenant. God renewed it again with Jacob. The covenantal relationship of these three Patriarchs in three successive generations is the reason the Scriptures use “the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob” as **one name** for **Deity**.

Accordingly, the more we can know of Abraham, the more we can know of the covenant with the Fathers spoken of by Malachi. Any book written by Abraham should be priceless to us.

The Book of Abraham translated by Joseph Smith has become a battleground **because it is so important** to our salvation. On one side are those who hope Joseph has made it possible to be sealed to the Fathers. Opposing them are those who cannot believe Joseph supplied a text of any value for salvation. The fight over the Book of Abraham is now aimed at the entire Restoration and Joseph’s Divine calling. Because of that controversy, I need to address the authenticity of the Book of Abraham in order to discuss God’s covenant with the Fathers.

There are several threads of thought to be drawn together. The first one involves understanding the different eras of written language used at the time of Abraham.

Most scholars believe Abraham lived around 2100 BC during the 9th Dynasty of Egypt. Moses lived around 1400 BC. (700 years later, Moses lived.) Egyptian texts date back to

before 3400 BC. A written Hebrew language was not developed until 900 BC, a half-millennium **after** Moses. Accordingly, since Moses composed the first five books of the Old Covenant, he would have used Egyptian characters. Hence, the Scriptures written on the plates of brass recovered from Laban and used by the Nephites were written in Egyptian.

The Hebrew language developed as a spoken language first and a written language added sometime later. The Book of Mormon confirms that although the Nephites spoke Hebrew, they used Egyptian characters to write their records. As Moroni finished his record his father started, Moroni explained what they used for the small, neatly carved characters on the Nephite records:

*We have written this record according to our knowledge, in the **characters** which are **called** among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us according to **our** manner of speech. And if our plates had been sufficiently large, we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been **altered by us also**. (Mormon 4:11 RE, emphasis added)*

The Nephites used only Egyptian “characters” for their writing and, apparently, not Egyptian language (at least not in the same way as would an Egyptian). This is at best an ambiguous point. How are we to understand it? Egyptian characters are not alphabet equivalent. A single character can mean many words, and their written form compresses language. We do not have **anything** equivalent to this in our common experience to make a meaningful analogy. Perhaps Pitman Shorthand would give an idea of it.

One other idea that may help is to think of Romance languages. All Romance languages use a common set of written characters but employ them for entirely different languages; the “reformed Egyptian” used “characters” to write a different quasi-Hebrew language.

For a comparison: Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian are all different languages that descended from Latin. They all use the Latin alphabet. But the words they write and the meanings of those words are different from one another. Occasionally, the different languages use identical letters for different words. In English (a non-Romance language), “mesa” means “an isolated, flat-topped hill with steep slopes.” But in Spanish, it means “table.”

The English language descended from German. So did Icelandic, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and Scots. These languages also use the Latin alphabet shared with the Latin-descended Romance language. But try to imagine another language that employs pictographic and short-hand figures to convey both words and sentences. If you’re moving information from such a language into any of the Latin alphabet languages, the result would be a far larger volume of translated text from the original text.

The Book of Mormon used Egyptian “characters” to write a non-Egyptian form of language to compress the material. How the Nephites achieved this over a millennium of “reforming” their written language was not clarified. However, if the actual plates of the Book of Mormon were to be examined by a modern Egyptian scholar, they would not be able to make any sense of it.

Hebrew is written and read from right to left. English is written from left to right. When I began learning Hebrew alphabet, to help me remember the sounds I would write my name using Hebrew characters in a left-to-right English format. “Dalet-Vav-Resh” was close enough, since vowels did not exist in Old Testament Hebrew. Since Hebrew would read these letters in reverse order, it would be read “Vav-Dalet” and pronounced something like “Ervid” and would mean “rod.” And that’s not my name.

Then when I began learning the Greek alphabet, to help me remember the sounds, I would also write my name using Greek characters. But I added the letter “v” because it was the only way I could think of to make it work: “Delta-Epsilon-Nu-V-Epsilon-Rho.” Because “v” is English, it would not be used by a Greek speaker to figure the word out. Therefore, it would be pronounced something like “Dener” and would mean “steward.” That’s also not my name.

When you use only characters borrowed from another language’s alphabet but write things for your own native language, the result is a hybrid that requires an explanation. Hence, Moroni’s explanation that the Nephites only employed the Egyptian “characters” (and not the Egyptian language) in etching the record. This idea will figure in later in this talk.

Also significant is the assignment given to Joseph Smith to reform the Bible text. Joseph Smith began working on a revised Bible in June 1830. Joseph used the King James Version as his source text to accomplish the revision. There were few (if any) Greek or Hebrew materials used. Nothing was rendered from one language into another. The work was based on revelation, inspiration, and insight given to Joseph Smith by the Lord. The LDS Historian’s Office has correctly called the work a “revision” of the Bible. **However technically inappropriate** we may think it is to use the word “translation” for Joseph’s work, it is **always called** a “translation” by the Lord in numerous revelations to Joseph.

By November the material about Adam, Cain, Abel, and the first murderer had been finished. The work advanced to include the Enoch material in December, and on 7 December 1830, Sidney Rigdon was commanded to act as scribe to “write for him.” The project included correcting the Bible, as well as numerous additions. It was undertaken so that the Bible would be rewritten and, according to the Lord, to become *even as they are in [God’s] own bosom* (T&C 18:6). The work of restoring Genesis advanced quickly. By February ~~1832~~ [1831], Genesis 1:1 through 5:12 was finished. These are eight chapters of the Book of Moses (as published in the Pearl of Great Price by the LDS Church). In these early materials, there are notable additions made regarding:

- Moses,
- The Creation of this world,
- An explanation of Satan’s pre-Earth existence and history,
- The fall of man,
- Adam and Eve, and
- Enoch (among many others).

So much material involving Enoch was added to chapter 4 of Genesis that it’s become referred to as the “Book of Enoch.”

When the Genesis account got to Melchizedek, a flood of new material was provided. From this addition, we learn that faith—not priesthood—is the power that stops the mouths of lions and quenches the violence of fire. Also, ordination to the Holy Order comes from the voice of God and is conferred according to God’s will. That will of God is predicated on two things:

- Belief on the name of God in **this** world, **and**
- The will of the Son of God **before the foundation** of this world.

Despite the **many** additions and corrections to the Genesis text, **very little** was added in the Joseph Smith Bible revisions about **Abraham**. Given the importance of Abraham as a pivotal covenant Father, **not** adding an expanded account of his life to Genesis is a **significant** omission. The Lord told Abraham: *For as many as receive this gospel shall be called after your name and shall be accounted your seed, and shall rise up and bless you, as unto their Father* (Abraham 3:1 RE). Given Abraham’s importance, we should expect that any revision of Genesis would add as much about him as Genesis added about Adam and Enoch and Melchizedek. But the JST Bible does not do so.

If the Book of Abraham materials were added to the Genesis text, it would replace and expand the text from Genesis chapter 6, midway in verse 8, through chapter 7, midway through verse 4. The Book of Abraham supplies the missing important details we need to know that were omitted from the Genesis account of the Inspired Version of the Bible.

It appears that the foreknowledge of God made it unnecessary for a JST expansion of Genesis materials about Abraham. When Michael Chandler later sold four mummies, two papyrus scrolls, and some papyrus fragments (in July 1835) to buyers in Kirtland, events were set in motion that resulted in adding Abrahamic details to our Scriptures. Three parties (one of whom was Joseph Smith) paid the \$2,400 sale price. The Book of Abraham was then produced after Joseph Smith got access to the papyri. Instead of being part of the JST Bible, it is called a “translation” of a papyrus scroll.

The “translation” began in Kirtland from July to November 1835 and produced the text from Abraham 1:1 through first half of 4:2 in the Restoration Edition of Scriptures. (In the LDS scriptures it’s Abraham 1:1 through 2:18.) There are three different copies of the translation made in Kirtland in existence. These have been identified as Book of Abraham Manuscript A, B, and C.

- Manuscript A is in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams.
- Manuscript B is in the handwriting of Warren Parrish.
- Manuscript C is in the handwriting of Warren Parrish and William W. Phelps.

None of the Kirtland era translations of the Book of Abraham include the introduction to the book. That introduction attributes the text to a papyrus written “by the hand of Abraham.” That statement has been the focus of a great deal of controversy. It states: “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.” Those words are in the handwriting of Willard Richards, and there is no existing source to explain why he added them to the

publication of the Book of Abraham in the *Times & Seasons* in March 1842 (see *JSP, Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, p. 245).

A small library of material has been written on the relationship (or lack of relationship) between the remaining Joseph Smith Egyptian papyri fragments and the Book of Abraham. It's an understatement to say that subject is controversial. But given the importance of Abraham's status as the "Father of the righteous," it is important to discuss the controversy.

If one is objective, the text of the Book of Abraham presents insurmountable problems if it must satisfy the current scholarly understanding of the Egyptian papyri purchased from Michael Chandler. If the authenticity of the Book of Abraham must be based on that, it's very problematic. That is not to say that the scholar's approach to this controversy is without its weaknesses.

The Egyptian language had two earliest forms; the first to develop was hieroglyphic and dates from before 4000 BC. At about 390 BC... Oh, excuse me: At about 390 AD, Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I closed all religious temples that he regarded as pagan throughout his empire. Because of this, hieroglyphs were no longer used. Egypt was inside his empire. Therefore, the Egyptian temples closed, and the hieroglyphic language was neglected and ultimately abandoned altogether. For 1500 years, the language was lost. Egyptian monuments remained, but no one had a clue what the hieroglyphs meant.

After being lost for a millennium-and-a-half, hieroglyphic interpretation has been recovered only in a small part through work based on the Rosetta Stone. In July 1799, French soldiers were rebuilding a fort near the town of Rosetta and discovered a stone inscribed with three scripts: hieroglyphs in the top register, Greek at the bottom, and a script later identified as "Demotic" in the middle. Demotic was a still later form of Egyptian writing and was the common form spoken at the time the Rosetta Stone was originally carved.

Using the Greek from the Rosetta Stone as a guide to decipher the hieroglyphs, an attempt has been made to understand hieroglyphic Egyptian. The Rosetta stone contains a decree from Ptolemy V (dates from 196 BC). This is at the very end of a dying Egyptian culture, religion, language, and history. This era is known as the Ptolemaic dynasty.

Greeks controlled Egypt after Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BC. When Alexander the Great died, his empire was divided between four generals. At that time, General Ptolemy assumed control over Egypt. The likelihood that the form of Egyptian hieroglyphic language dating from 196 BC is an accurate guide for understanding the way the language was understood **millennia** earlier is at best doubtful. If we accept the dating of 2100 BC for Abraham's life, there would have been **two millennia** of time separating the language of Abraham from the language of the Rosetta Stone.

The most basic linguistic problem is to understand how language changes with time.

Imagine you had a time machine. If you are like me, there would be many times and places that you would like to visit. In most of them, however, no one spoke English. If you could not afford the Six-Month-Immersion Trip to, say, ancient Egypt, you would

have to limit yourself to a time and place where you could speak the language. Consider, perhaps, a trip to England. How far back in time could you go and still be understood? Say we go to London in the year 1400...

As you emerge from the time machine, a good first line to speak, something reassuring and recognizable, might be the opening line of the Lord's Prayer. The first line in a conservative, old-fashioned version of the Modern Standard English would be, "*Our Father, who is in heaven, blessed be your name.*" In the English of 1400, as spoken by Chaucer, you would say, "*Oure fadir that art in heunes, halwid be thy name.*" Now turn the dial back another four hundred years to 1000 CE, and in Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, you would say, "*Faeader, ure thu the eart on heofonum, si thin nama gehalgot.*" A chat with Alfred the Great would be out of the question.

Most normal spoken languages over the course of a thousand years undergo enough change that speakers at either end of the millennium, attempting a conversation, would have difficulty understanding [one another]. (David W. Anthony, *The Horse, The Wheel and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*, p.22, footnotes omitted, italics in original)

Consequently, it would be surprising—bordering on miraculous—if the way Egyptian hieroglyphs were understood at the time [of] the Rosetta Stone proves identical to the way that they were understood two-thousand years earlier in the lifetime of Abraham.

That having been said, Egyptologists believe they have fragments of the Joseph Smith papyri translated by him to compose the Book of Abraham. They rely on their ability to interpret these fragments using reconstructed Ptolemaic Egyptian. Using their skill-set, they are confident that the fragments do not contain a Book of Abraham but are, instead, an Egyptian Book of Breathings (a sen-sen papyri). They conclude Joseph Smith was unable to "translate" the source document.

There are multiple ways apologists have dealt with this problem:

- One approach, including Hugh Nibley's analysis, is that there was an Egyptian papyri source but dispute that the papyrus fragments we have are the actual text Joseph translated. This group of apologists assume what Joseph actually translated was destroyed in the Chicago fire. The approach accepts Willard Richards' *Times & Seasons* introduction explaining that it is a translation of records from the catacombs of Egypt, originating with Abraham.
- A second apologetic approach is to claim there never was a source papyrus for the Book of Abraham. This position ignores Willard Richards' *Times & Seasons* introduction. This approach claims the source for the Book of Abraham was entirely revelation from Heaven. The LDS Church now seems to accept this view.
- A third apologetic approach is that the Michael Chandler papyri were indeed the source for the Book of Abraham, and the text can actually be recovered using the Joseph Smith Papyri. These advocates make a full-throated defense of Willard Richards' *Times & Seasons* introduction. Until the scholarly understanding of

Egyptology challenged Mormons, this was the overwhelming position of those who accepted the Book of Abraham as Scripture. In this arena of argument, there is a belief that the hieroglyphs contained hidden, esoteric meaning encoded in their form. As Dan Vogel describes it, "...other, more spiritual, mystical, and theologically powerful messages were encoded in their pictographic etymologies" (*Book of Abraham Apologetics: A Review and Critique*, p.67). Vogel rejects that idea.

There are other approaches. All of them address the issue of what perspective should be used to explain Joseph's translation.

- Should we assume the illustrations were original to Abraham? If so, then to interpret them, maybe we should look to how Egyptians in Abraham's day, or Abraham himself, would have understood them.
- Or should we assume the illustrations were original to Abraham but modified over time for other uses by the ancient Egyptians?
- Or do we assume the illustrations were connected to the Book of Abraham when the Joseph Smith papyri were created in the Ptolemaic period?
- Do we need to consider what Egyptians of that time thought of these drawings to represent?
- Or should we assume the illustrations were connected to the Book of Abraham for the first time in the Ptolemaic period, but to interpret them we ought to look at what Egyptian priests integrating Jewish, Greek, and Mesopotamian religious practices into native Egyptian practices would have thought about them?
- Or should we instead look at how Jews of that area would have understood them?
- Or were the illustrations never part of an ancient Book of Abraham but instead adapted by Joseph Smith to depict the ancient text he revealed and translated?

Well, in the give-and-take following deciphering the Rosetta Stone and the research done to develop some understanding of the Egyptian languages, the apologists who think the Book of Abraham was directly translated from the Joseph Smith papyri appear to hold the weaker position. However, that's not the end of the matter.

In every case in which he has produced a translation, Joseph Smith has made it clear that his inspiration is by no means bound to any ancient text but is free to take wings at any time. To insist, as the critics do, that "translation" may be understood only in the sense in which they choose to understand it, while the Prophet **clearly** demonstrates that he intends it to be taken in a very **different** sense, is to make up the rules of the game one is playing as well as being the umpire. (Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, p. 4, emphasis added)

Since Joseph Smith did not explain how the text was "translated," that issue is left to conjecture. The entire debate between Egyptian scholars and apologists centers on the

translation process. However, Joseph Smith **did not** use the term “translation” as would a scholar. One example illustrates the difference:

While Oliver Cowdery was the scribe during the Book of Mormon translation, he and Joseph discussed whether the Apostle John died or continued on Earth. The question was answered by a revelation. The written account in our Scripture about the answer includes this explanation: *A revelation given to Joseph Smith Jr. and Oliver Cowdery in Harmony, Pennsylvania, April 1829, when they desired to know whether John, the beloved disciple, tarried on earth. **Translated from** [a] parchment, written and hid up by himself* (Joseph Smith History 13:17, emphasis added). Joseph did not have the parchment. Therefore, there was no parchment source for the revelation. It came as Joseph Smith received it from God through *the Urim and Thummim* (Ibid.).

Sidney Rigdon arrived in Fayette (during December 1830) as the Bible revision was then underway. The project involved editing and correcting the Bible. That project was also **consistently referred** to as a “translation” of the Bible, even though it would be more correctly called an “inspired revision.” On December 7th, 1830, the commandment was given to Sidney: *You shall write for him, and the scriptures shall be given, even as they are in my own bosom, to the salvation of [mine] own elect...* (T&C 18:6). This helped explain what the term “translated” meant for the Bible revision project. It clearly refers to something different than how the term is generally used and understood.

When Enoch’s City was taken to Heaven, it is described as being “translated” or a “translation.” For Enoch, “translated” meant moving someone from Earth into Heaven and changing him or her so they could survive there. This meaning can also be understood and used for the “translation” of the parchment of John. It means taking something recorded and preserved in Heaven and moving it back to Earth where it had been lost.

I think that the word “translated” as it refers to the Book of Abraham should be understood in **this sense**: It was something recorded in Heaven and was moved back to the Earth where it had been lost. Regardless of whether or not conveying Abraham’s testimony from Heaven back to Earth required a surviving papyrus scroll, that question is not as important as the accuracy and truthfulness of the Book of Abraham account that originated with Father Abraham. Only if the text is true, accurate, and legitimately Abraham’s would it be worthy for canonizing as Scripture. **Joseph Smith clearly intended for the Book of Abraham to be Scripture.**

Apart from using the word “translation,” the content of the material bears all the indicia of an ancient record from the time of Father Abraham. The account in the Book of Abraham can be compared with Abraham’s history in Genesis. The comparison shows there are over a dozen details added through the Book of Abraham account that are **missing** from Genesis. For example:

- The famine in the homeland of Ur,
- Haran[’s] (Abraham’s brother) death in the famine,
- Terah (Abraham’s father) repenting of his idolatry,
- Terah’s return to idolatry,

- Believers becoming the “seed of Abraham” and inherit the blessings through him,
- Abraham held the priesthood,
- Abraham earnestly sought God,
- An angel of the Lord was sent to rescue Abraham,
- Abraham was familiar with Egyptian gods,
- Abraham was 62 years old (not 75, as in Genesis) when he left Haran,
- Abraham made converts while in Haran,
- Abraham prayed for God to end the famine in Chaldea, and
- The Lord instructed Abraham [Abram] to say that Sarai was his sister.

All these differences (related to Abraham) can be found in ancient sources recorded in **non-biblical** texts. If ancient sources confirm events set out in the Book of Abraham **did happen** in Abraham’s life, it’s hard to simply dismiss the validity of the book as inauthentic. It only makes the most sense to consider... The most important thing to consider is the text itself when deciding the validity of the Book of Abraham.

One might dismiss a single element found in a nonbiblical tradition that parallels the Book of Abraham as mere coincidence. However, when a large number of such elements come together from diverse times and places, they overwhelmingly support the Book of Abraham as an ancient text. There are far too many references to Terah as an idolator, Abraham as a sacrificial victim, Abraham as an astronomer, and Abraham as a missionary to lightly dismiss their antiquity. In addition, many other distinctive elements found in these traditions, though not repeated frequently, add to the overall strength of the unique elements found in the Book of Abraham. (Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, p. xxxv)

Facsimile 3 includes the comment that the scene depicts *Abraham...reasoning upon the principles of astronomy in the king’s court*. This echoes the account by Josephus that (to the Egyptians) Abraham, “...confuted the reasonings they made use of, every one for their own practices, demonstrating that such reasonings were vain and void of truth; whereupon he was admired by them in those conferences as a very wise man, and one of great sagacity, when he discoursed on any subject...” (*The Antiquity of the Jews*, Book 1, Chapter 2, ¶ 2). Josephus explained that Abraham, “...communicated to them arithmetic, and delivered to them the science of astronomy...” (*Ibid.*).

The oldest written Egyptian material is the *Pyramid Texts* and date from the 5th and 6th Dynasties. At the time of those writings, the original Pharaonic imitative religion was already approximately a thousand years old. There is no way to know how well the religion was preserved between the first Pharaoh’s initial imitation and a millennium later when the *Pyramid Texts* were written.

Egypt has a **complicated** theological development that morphed over time. The Horus stellar religion is very early. The Osirian religion (sometimes linked to lunar theology) does not arise until nearly a thousand years after the *Pyramid Texts* at Saqqara and, arguably, most reflects the religion of the New Kingdom. That theology differs from the beliefs of the Old Kingdom religion. It was the Old Kingdom theology that is closer to that of Adam. ~~It was the Old Kingdom...~~ (Oh, excuse me.) Finally, the Memphite religion of Ra apparently begins

in the late Old Kingdom. However, Ra (as the sun god) is syncretized to Ahmon (the god of light). The figure of Ahmon is present in both the star cult and the sun cult. As Egyptian religion changed at the time of the New Kingdom, nothing remained of the star cult.

The Book of Abraham's exposition on the sun, earth, planets, and stars fits neatly into the cosmological issues perplexing the rulers of the 9th Dynasty. (And by the way, the Joseph Smith rendering of the word "planets" is criticized by a number of scholars as being not a term that was understood at the time. But the word "planets" means "a star that wanders." So, you had fixed stars, and you had stars that wandered. "Planets" simply is referring to the stars that move in the sky overhead. And so, calling them "planets" is not at all problematic. It's just someone chafing to find an argument to throw at Joseph and at the Book of Abraham. And like so many of those things, as soon as you breathe on them, the house of cards falls over.)

There are many connections between the language of Egypt and the Restoration. The hieroglyphic form of Egyptian was used primarily to record religious texts and was the more formal or sacred form of the writing. A second, less formal form developed early in Egyptian language evolution, and it's called "hieratic." This second form was cursive and was the more likely form used on the Brass Plates. It's arrogant to assume that Ptolemaic era writing is a sound basis for ciphering backward over 2,000 years to decode Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the end, the question must be asked: Do **you** trust scholar's attempt to reconstruct antiquity using a partial record from 196 BC when it **conflicts with** the revelation given to Joseph Smith claiming to be a prophet, seer, and translator? Or do you believe God could inspire a prophet to recover a lost record from an ancient patriarch? It's one or the other.

It is significant that Joseph Smith claimed that the Old Testament written on the Brass Plates, as well as the record of the Nephites, were written in Egyptian. At the time and under the circumstances, Joseph Smith had little reason to make such a claim. With what we know now, it would be an error to claim otherwise. The choice is between Joseph being prescient or prophetic.

Joseph revealed that Adam and his immediate posterity wrote the first records of God dealing with mankind. It was called "a book of remembrance" (see Genesis 3:14 RE). That record was written in *a language which was pure and undefiled* (Ibid.). We know these records existed during Abraham's life (thousands of years later): *The records of the Fathers, even the Patriarchs, ...the Lord, my God, preserved in my own hands* (Abraham 2:4 RE).

By the time of **Moses**, however, the original records were lost. Moses had to restore the record of the Creation based on the revelation he received directly from the Lord. Moses was commanded:

You shall write the things which I shall speak. And in a day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught, and take many of them from the book which you shall write, behold, I will raise up another like unto you, and they shall be had again among the children of men, among even as many as shall believe. (Genesis 1:7 RE)

Pharaoh's daughter raised Moses from birth. **She** named him and treated him as "her son" (see Exodus 1:5 RE). Accordingly, when Moses was commanded to write the record revealed to him by the Lord, he would have recorded it in the language he understood: the language his adopted mother taught him, which was Egyptian. This detail is exactly what the Book of Mormon explains about the Brass Plates. Moses replaced the lost records of the Fathers by revelation from God. That record is described in the Book of Mormon as *the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass* and were composed *in the language of the Egyptians* (Mosiah 1:1 RE). **Ask yourself** the likelihood of a New England farm boy in 1829 choosing to claim the Old Testament was recorded in the Egyptian language? It's a remarkable bulls-eye detail, unlikely to have occurred to a youthful swindler. (But of course, Joseph was an actual prophet, and therefore, God revealed to him the truths he recounted.)

Since Joseph translated over 500 pages of what was likely derived from Hieratic Egyptian for the Book of Mormon, he read and understood one version of that language better than any scholar, including all who have lived since the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. Because I accept Joseph's claims of being a prophet, seer, and translator at face value, it's easy for me to resolve conflicts over Egyptian texts in favor of Joseph and against the scholarly critics.

Joseph Smith Papers, Volume 4 of the Revelations and Translations has copies of Egyptian Alphabet materials produced by Joseph's scribes: Oliver Cowdery, William W. Phelps, and Warren Parrish. Teryl Givens has taken the position that these texts prove, "The Book of Abraham manuscripts, unlike their Book of Mormon counterpart, bear clear evidence of reworking, revising, and editing. This was no spontaneous channeling of a finished product by any stretch..." (*The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture*, p.201). He interprets these as proof that Joseph engaged in a very complex deciphering process to produce the Book of Abraham using the hieroglyphs in the Book of Breathing.

When I first saw the Egyptian Alphabet materials, it appeared to me to be an attempt to reverse engineer Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham by using the Book of ~~Abraham~~ [Breathing] papyrus. Recall that Oliver Cowdery had attempted to translate the Book of Mormon and failed in that attempt. When he failed, the Lord explained his failure to him, stating:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But behold, I say unto you that you must study it out in your mind, then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right, [then] I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. (Joseph Smith History 13:26 RE)

Two of the three Egyptian Alphabet studies (A and B) were in whole (or in major part) the study of Oliver Cowdery. It appears that these were the result of Oliver's attempts to follow the Lord's guidance after his failure to successfully translate the Book of Mormon. When he failed in 1829, the Lord said there were *other records have I that I will give unto you power that you may assist to translate* (Ibid. vs. 24). It seems apparent that the Egyptian Alphabet study in late 1835 was Oliver's (and the other scribes') attempt to validate the translation process and act on the earlier promise to Oliver.

Teryl Givens' speculation that the Egyptian Alphabet is Joseph Smith's study of the papyrus is refuted by John S. Thompson in his article, "We May Not Understand Our Words': The Book of Abraham and the Concept of Translation in The Pearl of Great [Greatest] Price." Thompson shows from contemporaneous sources that Joseph's translation was accomplished quickly and before the Egyptian Alphabet documents were created. It's clear from an examination of the historical record that the scribes did their deciphering work of the Egyptian characters **after** the translation of the Book of Abraham had been done. Accordingly, using the Egyptian Alphabet materials to try to understand the translation process is not likely to help us understand what Joseph did (but much more likely to help us understand his scribes' attempt to understand Joseph's translating work).

It is not possible to resolve this question. Those directly involved **were never asked**, and they failed to leave a clear account of **what** the Egyptian Alphabet documents were, **why** they were produced, and **how** they relate to the translation of the Book of Abraham. This has resulted in debate between scholar-critics and scholar-apologists.

The latest writer to weigh in on the subject, Dan Vogel, deals with the absence of hard answers by arguing the meaning and import of ambiguous details. As a lawyer, I appreciate his argumentation. However, since I care about the subject and would like to know the truth, the arguments from implication in the absence of proof cannot be fully convincing. The souls of men must not be trifled with (see T&C 138:18).

In arguing from the absence of hard historical evidence, Vogel urges his belief that:

...what is required in any treatment of the Book of Abraham is not fluency in [hieroglyphs] or a belief in Joseph Smith's prophetic calling, but a firm, clear-headed understanding of the methods of history and of the relevant nineteenth-century historical sources. Anything else is counterproductive. (*Book of Abraham Apologetics: A Review and Critique*, p. xviii)

He makes the argument that the Kirtland Egyptian Papers were not created after the translation but were used to create and translate the Book of Abraham. His arguments are somewhat persuasive.

However, his analysis is **advocacy**, and his writings betrays the **assumptions necessary** for his conclusions. The book necessarily reflects a scholar's caution in the absence of certainty. Although his work is interesting, well written, and attempts to make reasonable points, the information we have available does not let us resolve **anything** about the Kirtland Egyptian Papers. Everything is arguable. Vogel's arguments clearly belong in the debate, but in the end is only argument (like so much else involving the Book of Abraham). A few examples of how he supports his arguments are (these are quotes):

- "implies a process of translation" (p. 1)
- "This clearly implies" (p. 12)
- "implies that" (p. 14)
- "more careful analysis shows" (p. 17)
- "the simplest way to explain" (p. 17)
- "This suggests" (p. 18)

- “most reasonably explained as” (p. 18)
- “was likely due to” (p. 18)
- “may have dictated” (p. 19)
- “The details of Smith’s participation in the creation of his own history are not...well known, but apparently” (p. 39)
- “were likely the result of” (p. 39)
- “Apparently, there was some hesitation” (p. 50)
- “is instructive, although piecing together what was intended is not always clear and necessitates some conjecture” (p. 54)
- “possibly from” (p. 55)
- “may have taken from” (p. 55)
- “is probably more than coincidence” (p. 56)
- “This is a problem from the theory” (p. 57)
- (and so on)

Whether I agree or disagree with his interpretation does not give me the actual historical certitude that would answer the most important questions about the Book of Abraham’s creation (or “translation,” as the term was used and understood by Joseph Smith). There are debaters on both sides. They all make arguments to support their desired conclusion. Familiarity with the Egyptian language (insofar as the Ptolemaic period Rosetta Stone material permits the language to be resurrected) causes the Egyptologists to be dogmatic. They speak in firm declaratives. **But** Joseph Smith saw God the Father, His Son, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, Peter, James, and John, and a host of angels who declared their dispensations, keys, rights, and honors. Joseph also spoke in firm declaratives. They line up on opposite sides; **we** must choose between them.

The foregoing excerpts were taken from Denver’s conference talk titled “The Religion of the Fathers”, given in Aravada, Nevada on March 27, 2021.