

RESPONDING TO ERRORS IN AN ANTI-MORMON FILM:

“THE LOST BOOK OF ABRAHAM: INVESTIGATING A REMARKABLE MORMON CLAIM”

by Ben McGuire

OVERVIEW

Within the last year, the Institute of Religious Research (IRR), a professional ‘anti-Mormon’ ministry, has produced a film entitled *The Lost Book of Abraham: Investigating a Remarkable Mormon Claim*. This paper is a review of that film, as well as an analysis of the bias evident in what the producers decided not to discuss in the film.

- While presented as a documentary and passed off as a scholarly production, the film’s sole purpose is to attack the LDS Church.
- The film ignores the large body of scholarly work developed in the last decade.
- The purpose of this review is to demonstrate the failure of the film to deal with scholarly issues, such as:
 - How old were the papyri, and how old did Joseph Smith believe they were?
 - Is it possible that Egyptian funerary texts could contain an Abrahamic tradition?
 - Do we have the actual papyri used by Joseph Smith to produce the text of the Book of Abraham?
 - How were the papyri translated? Was it a merely mechanical or a divinely inspired revelatory process?

This paper also briefly discusses the nature and bias of the film and its producers.

BACKGROUND

The Lost Book of Abraham: Investigating a Remarkable Mormon Claim is touted as a documentary and passed off as a scholarly production by its producers. The reality, however, is that the sole purpose of this production is to

attack The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the beliefs of its members. Much of the film is quite accurate, but much is also misleading. For those who understand the latest in scholarship about the Book of Abraham, this movie brings to mind the old saying that Satan will tell you a thousand truths to get you to believe a single lie.

This is not IRR’s first attempt to denigrate the Book of Abraham, considered by members of the LDS Church to be sacred scripture. Ten years ago a book was published by IRR, authored by Charles M. Larson, entitled *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*. This film repeats many of the same charges as are printed in the book and conveniently ignores the large body of scholarly work that has been developed since its publication. This film, while trying to maintain a scholarly facade, loses much of its credibility because of this fact—it fails to acknowledge current scholarship.

This review is not an attempt to prove the Book of Abraham to be a divinely inspired text; its purpose is not to convert the reader to the LDS faith. Its sole purpose is to demonstrate the failure of the film to deal with the issues of the Book of Abraham as they are now understood in both the scholarly and apologetics communities of the LDS faith.

This response is intended to explore some of the unresolved issues surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Abraham. Of all of Joseph Smith’s translational endeavors, it is the one we know the least about, and arguably the one for which we have no original copies of

Joseph’s work. Because of the lack of clear contemporary accounts, and the apparent contradictions that appear in the accounts we do have, the Book of Abraham has been the subject of countless speculations. The rediscovery of some of the Egyptian papyri which Joseph Smith owned has done nothing but feed these fires. This review is a brief response to some of the concerns which skeptics raise in this film over



the production of the Book of Abraham. It is not intended as a complete rebuttal of the IRR film; there are undoubtedly other reviews that will be forthcoming, and the reader is urged to review current scholarly data as it relates to the Book of Abraham. A good place to begin your search is at the FAIR Web site, the address of which is at the end of this review.

THE AGE OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

The film makes three references, all of which are very similar, that deal with the age of the text and/or the age of the Joseph Smith papyrus. The first reference occurs in the introduction to the film, as follows:

Smith claimed the scroll contained a lost book of Abraham—an original text nearly 4,000 years old.

The second remark occurs a little later:

From early on, non-Mormons were dubious of Joseph's claim to have recovered a book written by Abraham 2,000 years before Christ, and lost for nearly 4,000 years.

The film's transcript includes a footnote for the above remark, which appears as follows:

In a letter of November 13, 1843 to James Arlington Bennett, Joseph Smith referred to his Egyptian mummies and papyri: "the art of embalming human bodies and preserving them in the catacombs of Egypt, whereby men, women, and children, as mummies, after a lapse of nearly 3500 years come forth among the living and although dead, the papyrus which has lived unharmed in their bosoms [sic] speaks for them in language like the sound of an earthquake..." Ms. D 155 bx 2 fd 6 v. Joseph Smith Collection. LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City. As cited by Edward H. Ashment, unpublished paper, 2000. "Thus, Smith dated the Egyptian writings to be ca. 3500 years old; that is, according to him, the papyri were written ca. 1660 BCE." (Ashment).

A thoughtful review of these assertions leads to a couple of direct criticisms. First, the remarks made by Joseph Smith in the letter dated November 13, 1843 to James Arlington Bennett as recorded in the unpublished manuscript of Edward H. Ashment would not lead me to the same conclusions that Ashment drew. In other words,

his statement in that letter is not sufficient basis to conclude that Joseph Smith believed that the actual papyrus that he had was 3500 years old. That the *contents* of that papyrus could be considered that old was something that he taught. It should be obvious that the papyrus and the contents of the papyrus can have different ages. (For instance, an ancient Greek play could be written on modern paper, but the age of the paper does not mean that the play is of the same age.)

The statements above avoid making a critical distinction between medium (the papyrus) and its content. The film reinforces the fallacy that it was the papyri themselves that were that old when they declare that the papyri had been "lost for nearly 4,000 years." (Of course Ashment calculates this at about '3500 years old', which the producers of the film have rounded up to 4,000 to enhance the disparity.) Because the film relies on an obscure reference, which has other possible alternative explanations, and because that reference is not included in the film, this is an indication that the producers are not interested in explaining this detail. While this may not be of huge significance, it is used to set the stage—a stage that is weak from the outset.

I read into Joseph's remarks the idea that he was referring to buried papyri in general, and not specifically to those in his possession, when he uses the phrase "after a lapse of nearly 3500 years." Then, there is an often-ignored statement, from Parley P. Pratt, close friend and associate of Joseph Smith, and an apostle of the LDS Church at the time, who said this of the papyri and their contents:

The record is now in course of translation by means of the Urim and Thummim, and proves to be a record written partly by the father of the faithful, Abraham, and finished by Joseph when in Egypt. After his death, it is supposed they were preserved in the family of the Pharaohs and afterwards hid up with the embalmed body of the female upon whom they were found. Thus it is, indeed, true, that the ways of the Lord are not man's ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts.¹

Here, Pratt is quite clear that there was a theory (the facts being unknown) that the papyrus containing the record of Abraham was "preserved" by the descendants of Pharaoh (and not the Israelites—a point of discussion within the film), and that it was later buried with the mummy on which they found it. Whether or not this was the exact same material that Abraham wrote upon, and the length of time it remained in the possession of

the descendants of Pharaoh is open to speculation. There are a number of current theories that reflect upon these ideas, but they are never discussed in the film.

Of course, someone who is predisposed to a critical view of the antiquity of the Book of Abraham can point to Pratt's statement and assert that the words "written partly by...Abraham" indicates that Abraham actually wrote the scroll. However, if I point to the Book of Peter in your bible and ask who wrote it, you would most likely say "Peter did." This is a reasonable answer, but far from factual. The book I am pointing at was probably printed in the past 10 years, yet Peter lived 2000 years ago. In other words, just because Peter may have been the author of the content, it does not mean that he wrote the book you are holding in your hands. The same can be stated concerning the papyri: Just because Abraham authored the content does not mean that he, in his own hand, wrote on the papyri. While it could be argued that the texts had been lost for some time, it is certain that Parley Pratt (and probably Joseph Smith) did not view the papyri as having been written by the hand of Abraham himself and lost in the clutches of a mummy for 4,000 years.

BORROWING FROM ANCIENT TRADITIONS

Borrowing from older traditions, especially in Egyptian funerary literature, was not uncommon in ancient writings. There is the statement that is found in the Egyptian Book of the Dead (the predecessor to the Book of Breathings from which Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham was taken), spell 166, which indicates that this borrowing can skip hundreds of years at a time. R.O. Faulkner, in his book *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, writes about this process:

The earliest Book of the Dead papyri date to the mid fifteenth century BC, but the ritual utterances and incantations they contain have a history which can be traced back more than a thousand years earlier. Some of the spells in the Book of the Dead originated in the Pyramid Texts which first appeared carved in hieroglyphs on the walls of the burial chamber and anteroom of the pyramid of King Wenis, last ruler of the Fifth Dynasty, about 2345 BC. Although this is their first written appearance it is clear from their content that many of these utterances had been in existence for centuries. One Pyramid Text (Spell 662) tells the dead king to cast the sand from his face, a clear allusion to burial in the desert sand which was especially

common during the Pre-dynastic Period, before 3100 BC. Another utterance (Spell 355) says that bricks have been removed from the great tomb, a reference to mud-brick mastaba tombs of the type discarded by royalty since the early Third Dynasties about 2680 BC.²

A little later Faulkner writes:

Some copies of Chapter 166 concerning the spell for the headrest state that the text was found 'at the neck of the mummy of King Usermaatre [that is, Ramesses II or Ramesses III] in the necropolis'. Some versions of chapter 167 concerning the bringing of the udjat-eye relate how the text was found by prince Khaemwese, son of King Ramesses II, in the cemetery at Saqqara...³

What exactly is going on here? Faulkner wrote "In Egyptian religion old beliefs were rarely discarded, new ideas and concepts were merely tacked on, even when in direct contradiction to existing views."⁴ While this is obviously not direct evidence that the Book of Abraham is on the papyri featured in the film, it gives credence to a view that the ancient papyri can include even more ancient content. It is not unthinkable to suggest that the content can pre-date the papyri on which the content is written by as much as two millennia or more.

In contrast, the producers of the film start by suggesting that Joseph Smith believed that the papyrus (and not just the text of the Book of Abraham) was 4,000 years old, and that it was written by the very hand of Abraham, himself. Whether this is deliberate deception on the part of the IRR or just an example of poor scholarship is open to debate. The effect, however, of not presenting pertinent information—such as that presented here—is to give the viewer a skewed and slanted view of a very complex topic. In this way the film smacks more of tabloid journalism than a true, unbiased documentary.

WHERE DID THE PAPYRI END UP?

Certainly there were several pieces of papyrus in the original collection owned by Joseph Smith, and after the Saints departed for Utah, they seemingly vanished. The film leads a little into their history:

In 1856, 12 days after Lucy's death, Emma Smith who now seemed to have ambivalent feelings about her late husband, sold the papyri to a man named Abel Combs.

Emma, now remarried to a man named Lewis C. Bidamon, provided an affidavit attesting that the antiquities had belonged to Joseph.

Voice of Emma Smith: This certifies that we have sold to Mr. A. Combs four Egyptian mummies with the records of them ... [they] were purchased by the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith at the price of twenty-four-hundred dollars in the year 1835. They were highly prized by Mr. Smith on account of the importance which attached to the record which was accidentally found enclosed in the breast of one of the mummies. Emma Smith Bidamon, May 26, 1856.

Their ownership is tracked:

Two of the mummies sold to Abel Combs were later acquired by a Chicago museum that was destroyed in the great Chicago fire of 1871. It was assumed that the Joseph Smith papyri had also been destroyed—lost forever to the emerging knowledge of Egyptology.

Then, with the discovery of the 11 fragments, the film now tries to associate the papyri found with the Book of Abraham:

The first clue was the most obvious. The torn picture found in one of the fragments was an identical match to the familiar picture in the beginning of the Book of Abraham. In fact, the tears on the original corresponded exactly to where the Book of Abraham drawing seemed to go awry.

There is of course no question that the fragment containing what remains of Facsimile 1 was used in the production of the Book of Abraham. The only consideration that can be given is to exactly how much of the fragment remained at the time of Joseph Smith. The IRR wants viewers to believe that Joseph “filled in” a hole in the papyrus with a drawing of a knife, and that the original papyrus could not have contained such an implement. LDS scholar John Gee has related a contemporary description, by a hostile witness who describes the knife—not in the context of the woodcuts used for printing early copies of the Book of Abraham, but rather in the context of the papyri themselves:

One final point: Nearly every attempt at reconstruction of Joseph Smith Papyrus I strenuously tries to avoid the knife in the standing figure’s hand. This, the critics say, is a figment of Joseph Smith’s imagination, with no basis in the

original papyrus scene. Nevertheless, an eye-witness account suggests that it was, in fact, present on the original. One visitor to Nauvoo during the lifetime of Joseph Smith describes being shown “a number of glazed slides, like picture frames, containing sheets of papyrus, with Egyptian inscriptions and hieroglyphs.... Pointing to the figure of a man lying on a table, he [the Mormon guide] said, “That is the picture of Abraham on the point of being sacrificed. That man standing by him with a drawn knife is an idolatrous priest of the Egyptians.” If the drawn knife was crudely sketched in, and easily distinguishable from the papyrus proper, this observer fails to mention it. Yet he was a hostile witness, eager to emphasize anything that looked fishy.⁵

The issue here is that the IRR contends the following in the course of the film:

In the same way, we know that those figures would never, under any circumstance, hold a knife. And that’s critical to the text itself because it’s not merely decoration for this text, it goes to the core of the supposed story that accompanies it. And if you take the knife away, you’ve taken the story away as well. And clearly the knife had no reason to be there.

So, although we have all agreed that the first facsimile came from the rediscovered papyri, exactly how closely it matches the original condition when it was in the possession of Joseph Smith is still highly debated. The film makes no mention of such ongoing debates. Instead, the producers present facts about the papyri as if there is no question about the negative conclusions they present. This, of course, is extremely prejudicial and misleading to the viewer.

The film goes on to discuss additional “proofs” that the Joseph Smith papyri are the exact ones used in the translation of the Book of Abraham:

Then, another discovery. A sequence of characters on a second piece of papyrus matched exactly a string of characters written in the left column of the translation manuscripts.

It appeared that, at Joseph’s direction, his scribes copied these characters from the papyrus one by one. Joseph then dictated the meaning, or translation, of each one—often whole paragraphs from a single hieratic character.

This, of course, has been soundly refuted time and again by LDS scholars and apologists. That the producers of the film include this without also including the position of LDS scholarship is simply more evidence of the biased and unbalanced nature of the film. This is particularly true since some of that scholarship was directed specifically at the IRR's previous attempt to discredit the Book of Abraham when they published Larson's book. There is no need to include all of the ignored research here; it is readily available on the Internet and in published form for anyone seeking a balanced consideration of the topic. It will suffice to point out a few items.

First, there is some question as to whether or not these pages were actually produced by or at the direction of Joseph Smith. Second, in the papers mentioned above (part of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers collection), there were two inks used—one for the 'translation,' and one for the column of 'Hieratic Characters.' Once in a while the hieratic characters overlap the English portions, and analysis shows that the hieratic characters were written after the English portions had been completed.⁶ This would hardly seem to be an indication that it was a translation in progress. There are no indicators of a translational process such as we would expect to see—no corrections, no textual emendations (even in the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon we find some spelling corrections). What is especially interesting about this evidence is that it is contained in information that the producers have, and to which the LDS Church directed them. At one moment, the producers tell us that the LDS Church and faithful Mormon scholars turned down the offer to participate, and at the next moment we see them completely ignoring the reference material they were directed to by the LDS Church (and they quote it during the documentary where it suits their purpose).⁷ I can certainly understand questioning the motives of the documentary producers when they consciously ignore existing evidence that would be detrimental to their negative agenda.

The film cements (at least in their view) the link between the Joseph Smith papyri and the Book of Abraham with this evidence:

A third piece was found which included, the same name—"Horus"—written in the published version of Facsimile 3. Although the Facsimile 3 picture was never found, it is at the end of the Book of Abraham, and is also a very familiar scene. Together, these four pieces form virtually the entire scroll in its original form.

John Gee recently published details from the personal journal of a Professor Gustavus Seyffarth,⁸ who detailed his visit to the St. Louis museum at the time it housed two of the Joseph Smith mummies and some of the papyri (which he translated). He also noted that there was significant text attached to the facsimile. These mummies and papyri were known to have gone to the museum in Chicago, and notwithstanding the papyri found, are still presumed to have been destroyed by fire.

DO WE HAVE THE PAPYRI FROM WHICH THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM WAS TRANSLATED?

Even though the IRR thinks that there is a rock-hard link between the Joseph Smith papyri and the Book of Abraham, and they only present positive evidence to support that link, the real answer is that it is doubtful that the Book of Abraham was translated from the Joseph Smith papyri that has been recovered. The film's producers want us to believe that what we have is in fact the original papyri used to translate the Book of Abraham. The position of the LDS Church has remained consistent: That we have only acquired the original to Facsimile 1, and that this is all we have that we can be sure was used by Joseph Smith to produce the Book of Abraham. The film's producers first give one of the current LDS positions on the subject and then attempt to refute it. The position is that given by Dr. John Gee, and as provided in the transcript to the film reads:

Dr. Gee puts forth the position that other than the original of Facsimile 1, the Joseph Smith papyrus fragments given to the Church in 1967 were, "not the portion of the papyri that contained the text of the Book of Abraham." He claims the scroll Joseph used was originally 10 feet long, and that there was a large section that is now missing, that may have contained the lost book.

The film then provides an assessment of this statement by an Egyptologist, Dr Robert Ritner, who remarks:

There's certainly no reason that this particular book of breathing scroll should be expanded much beyond the surviving length. I've now read the entire document from the beginning to end and made out what one could make out on the poor copy of the final vignette. The most that is missing from this text is simply two columns worth of Egyptian hieratic. And possibly a small vignette. But other than that, there would be

nothing more that would inflate its length much beyond its current size. It is both unprecedented and unreasonable to assume that an intrusive text about a completely different matter—a narrative history of Abraham and his descendants—would have been inserted into a document whose beginning, middle and end is devoted specifically to the resurrection of an Egyptian priest.

In his response Ritner makes a couple of assumptions that are both unwarranted and have evidence against them. The first assumption is that the papyri we have are the only available evidence. If this were the case, then clearly he would have a valid concern. However, the journal of Seyffarth, mentioned earlier, describes Facsimile 3 and some attached material.⁹ There is no question that this papyrus roll was significantly longer than the fragments still extant. This of course causes some significant problems for Ritner, who has just assured us that we could expect little expansion on the existing text. If the papyrus roll was really as long as Gee suggests (and there is some evidence to support this), then we have to wonder what it might have contained.

Other accounts, contemporary with the translation of the Book of Abraham, cover a wide range of descriptions, and certainly there is room for an expanded text. But, more to the point, and more convincing, is the likelihood that the papyrus from which the Book of Abraham was translated is not the Book of Breathings papyri as suggested by the film. There were originally at least five different Egyptian documents in the collection owned by Joseph Smith. Most of these can be identified by owner within the texts that we have (either in fragments, or as copies in the notebook of Joseph Smith). The known names of these owners are Hor, Tshenmin, Neferirrub, Sheshonq and Amenhotep.¹⁰ Four of those documents represent papyrus rolls, while Sheshonq comes from the Hypocephalus.

Many of the detractors of the Book of Abraham would insist that the extant papyri making up the Book of Breathings must be the original text of the Book of Abraham, insisting that the vignette of Facsimile 1, which was a part of that papyrus, is in the Book of Abraham. They also point to the phrase within the translated text itself, Abraham 1:12, which reads, in part, “and that you may have a knowledge of this altar, I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record.” There are a couple of issues that arise in conjunction with this. The first is that Facsimile 2, while included in the Book of Abraham, could not have been connected to the Book of Breathings papyri. They be-

longed to two separate individuals. This is very significant, and often glossed over by critics. Were it not for the statement within the text mentioned above, there would be no way for the critic to make such a conclusion at all.

The second issue is the possibility that the comments in verse 12 (and also in verse 14) are not original to Abraham, but rather come as parenthetical remarks provided by Joseph Smith as an explanation. Joseph apparently did not have any problems doing this, as documented by a few changes to the text of the Book of Mormon and by his New Translation of the Bible. If this is in fact the case, then this is an even greater indicator that the original text of the Book of Abraham was not the Book of Breathings that is evident in the Joseph Smith papyri.

Of course, to make this verse and vignette work within their theory, the producers of the video made this remark:

In other words, at the beginning of the scroll. Egyptian reads from right to left, and Joseph Smith, who was at the time studying Hebrew, which also reads from right to left, must have surmised this. It seemed certain that this piece was the beginning of the scroll used by Joseph Smith.

While it is true that Hebrew reads from right to left, I have to wonder how many other instances, where Joseph Smith was apparently correct, simply get chalked up to a lucky guess.

Additionally, we have that curious statement given by Parley P. Pratt in the *Millennial Star*, presented earlier in this review. The pertinent part of that statement reads: “The record is now in course of translation by means of the Urim and Thummim, and proves to be a record written partly by the father of the faithful, Abraham, and finished by Joseph when in Egypt”¹¹ In other words, this account suggests that the Book of Abraham was begun by Abraham, but was finished by Joseph. There are a number of statements describing the records of Abraham and Joseph that are not compatible with the Joseph Smith papyri, as we have them. They have usually been dealt with by suggesting that the Book of Abraham was said to come from the Book of Breathings papyrus while the Book of Joseph came from the Book of the Dead papyrus. Independent of these considerations, there is very little evidence to warrant the assumptions Ritner makes. Because he only concerns himself with the papyri fragments, and not with the contemporary accounts of these fragments from the

time of Joseph Smith, he neglects information that the LDS perspective finds essential in understanding the nature and role of the Egyptian documents. As Dr. Lanny Bell points out in the film:

From the evidence that we have today, it's quite safe to say that Joseph Smith did not have the Book of Abraham or the Book of Joseph in front of him in the form of these papyri because they bear no relationship to the contents of the stories or to his translation.

Which is precisely the position of the informed Mormon apologist, but not the viewer who relies only on materials published by IRR.

WAS THE TEXT OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM RECEIVED BY REVELATION?

In response to a theory put forth by Michael Rhodes in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*,¹² we get the following response from Dr. Stan Larson:

Dr. Stan Larson: Now days it seems popular to say that, well, Joseph Smith didn't claim to be translating, he just saw these illustrations and then was inspired with the text of the Book of Abraham. But it doesn't say in Joseph Smith's diary he kept at the time he was looking the pictures or the illustrations and then was inspired to give a story that we now know as the Book of Abraham, but rather, that he was translating these characters.

From the Diary of Joseph Smith: 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...

This afternoon I re-commenced translating from the ancient records...

I returned home and spent the day in translating the Egyptian records...

Spent the forenoon instructing those that called to inquire concerning the things of God in the last days...

Dr. Stan Larson: It seems clear—it doesn't just seem clear, it is clear from this statement—that he was making the translation from characters or hieroglyphics.

It is Dr. Larson's conclusion that is questionable. If we back up just a moment, we will see why. First, the journal entries from Joseph Smith:

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...¹³

One of the interesting points of this citation is that it was previously quoted with a small amount of additional context; the words "and the ancients unfolded to our understanding, the particulars of which will appear hereafter." Now this is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it is quite likely that the phrase (not included in this brief citation) 'unfolded to our understanding' is a reference to revelation. This, at least, is the understanding of most faithful LDS scholars who have written on the subject. Second, it seems much more inclusive than just referring to Abraham—and this is also omitted in the film. Joseph says, "the principles of astronomy as understood by father Abraham and the ancients." I will come back to this below. Finally, it should be noted that this is the entry for October 1, 1835. The second journal entry is as follows:

This afternoon I re-commenced translating from the ancient records...¹⁴

This is the entry for October 7, 1835. It is the final sentence of that journal entry. There is no need for the ellipses. It should be noted that nowhere in this statement does Joseph Smith refer to Abraham (or to Joseph for that matter). The third journal entry reads:

I returned home and spent the day in translating the Egyptian records...¹⁵

This is his journal entry for the November 19, 1835. Again, there is no reference specifically linking the papyri to Abraham or Joseph. Again, this is the last sentence in the journal entry:

Spent the forenoon instructing those that called to inquire concerning the things of God in the last days...¹⁶

This is from the November 24th entry. It seems that perhaps this is not quoted in its entirety, because as it stands, there is no reference to translation. The entry continues with the phrase: "In the afternoon we translated some of the Egyptian records," which concludes that journal entry.

Effectively, we have several entries over a two-month span indicating that some translation was going on of the ancient records. However, with the exception of the first one (and only indirectly there), they are not linked

to the Book of Abraham. There is in fact, only one specific entry which links the translation process to the Book of Abraham apart from the reference given above.¹⁷

You may be wondering why these details are significant at this point. The implication given by Dr. Larson is that when Joseph's journal speaks of translation, it must refer exclusively to the translation of the Book of Abraham, yet this clearly is not the case. There are a number of documents in the possession of the LDS Church that bear some significance to the Book of Abraham and the papyri owned by Joseph Smith. The documents are collectively referred to as the Kirtland Egyptian Papers (hereafter designated as KEP). I have included a basic summary of these documents in the endnotes.¹⁸ Of singular importance to this discussion is KEP #6, entitled "Valuable Discovery." It is also the only document among the KEP that bears the signature of Joseph Smith. There are two significant aspects of this "notebook" used by Joseph Smith. The first is that it contains (among other things) mounted pieces of papyri, and drawings of the contents of the papyri. Dr. John A. Wilson mentions this in his 1968 *Dialogue* article, when trying to identify the number of original papyri that must have been in Joseph Smith's hands. He wrote:

The Joseph Smith Egyptian papyri once consisted of at least six separate documents, possibly eight or more. That count may be checked through the eleven pieces recently transferred from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in November, 1967; from the "fragment" preserved in the Church Historian's office in Salt Lake City from the early days; from illustrations in the Pearl of Great Price; and from copies and mounted pieces of papyrus in a notebook which Joseph Smith labeled, "Valuable Discovery of Hidden Records."¹⁹

The second item of significance is that there are included in this notebook translations and commentary that have absolutely nothing to do with the Book of Abraham. For example, two pages contain no references to anything resembling the Book of Abraham, but instead reveal some details about the life of a certain "Katumin, Princess, daughter of On-i-tos [On-i-tas—variant spelling]..." Along with this are the dozens and dozens of unique names and words that are contained within this and the other documents in the KEP collection that never made it into the Book of Abraham. This makes us question, first of all, the underlying assumption that whenever *translation* is mentioned in Joseph's journal that it must relate to the Book of Abraham (and/or the Book of Joseph). If this is the case, it might well be postulated that much (if not most or all) of this description of

a mechanical translation process probably describes this additional material and not the contents of the Book of Abraham.

The evidence does not stop with an observation of the material that remains from Joseph's foray into Egyptology. We can add several observations of early members of the LDS Church. One that is particularly striking, which has received little attention (none in anti-LDS sources), is the statement published by Parley P. Pratt in the *Millennial Star* (quoted earlier and cited again here for emphasis):

The record is now in course of translation by means of the Urim and Thummim, and proves to be a record written partly by the father of the faithful, Abraham, and finished by Joseph when in Egypt. After his death, it is supposed they were preserved in the family of the Pharaohs and afterwards hid up with the embalmed body of the female upon whom they were found. Thus it is, indeed, true, that the ways of the Lord are not man's ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts.²⁰

The detail that I wish to draw from this account here is that the Urim and Thummim were the means of translation of the Book of Abraham. The Urim and Thummim, of course, also receive credit in the translation of the Book of Mormon²¹ and the revelation from John recorded in the D&C Section 7 as noted by Rhodes in his article in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* quoted by the documentary. This is simply another indication that the actual translation of the Book of Abraham material was not a mere mechanical process, but rather an inspired process. Whether or not the Book of Abraham was produced through this mechanical process, certainly Larson's statement ("...it is clear from this statement—that he was making the translation from characters or hieroglyphics") is based on incorrect assumptions.

CONCLUSIONS

The Lost Book of Abraham film begins with this provocative question:

So what was this ancient scroll? Was it a lost book of Abraham, or was it something else? Stay tuned and find out for yourself.

And concludes with this remark:

The evidence against the authenticity of the Book of Abraham cannot help but raise questions about Joseph Smith's other translations,

such as the more foundational Book of Mormon. For some, since Joseph's translation of the Book of Abraham, which can be tested, has been found to lack credibility, then how can we accept his translation of the Book of Mormon, which cannot be tested?

On the film's Web site, the following remark is made:

It's a fascinating story. It's bound to be a controversial story. But while this documentary succeeds in presenting the story and the facts in an interesting and accurate manner, it will be up to each viewer to draw his or her own conclusions.

The problem is that the film does not present all the facts. Instead, the film presents very limited and very skewed facts—only those that support the conclusion that the producers want the viewer to reach. Such a manipulative approach to filmmaking may seem at home in tabloid journalism, but it is anything but scholarly and balanced.

Perhaps the biggest fact that the film's producers keep under wraps is that IRR is an organization devoted, in part, to helping members of the LDS Church abandon their faith in favor of what they view as a "more traditional" Christianity. This viewpoint and "mission" colors the entire work. It does not allow for the non-knowledgeable viewer to make an informed conclusion, since the conclusion is presented in the film as a forgone fact.

I am especially startled in this production at the inclusion of Ritner, Blomberg and Mouw. I would have thought that such a blatant attack on the religious beliefs of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be beneath them. It is certainly clear that the position of faithful LDS scholars and of the LDS Church in avoiding this media presentation was justified. I hope that I have been able to add some balance to the presentation, and failing that, to at least notify you that an alternate perspective exists.

FURTHER READING

Gee, John. *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000. Without a doubt, this is an indispensable reference work for those curious about the Book of Abraham, the papyri involved, and the current scholarship surrounding them. Published in 2000, it is fairly current and contains previously unpublished research. 67 pages. The publisher's Web site is <http://>

farms.byu.edu and also contains a number of reviews of books on the Book of Abraham, including reviews of Charles Larson's book, *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*.

Mormonism Researched Web site, <http://www2.ida.net/graphics/shirtail/mormonis.htm>. Hosted by Kerry Shirts, one of the most prolific LDS apologists in defense of the Book of Abraham. Kerry's site contains hundreds of pages of reviews, articles on the Book of Abraham, including details from the facsimiles, and a variety of correspondence between Kerry and both critics and believers of the Book of Abraham.

FAIR Web site, <http://www.fairlds.org>. The FAIR site contains an apologetics database with a dozen articles related to the Book of Abraham. The site also contains hundreds of additional articles on a wide range of relevant LDS topics.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <http://www.lds.org>. This site contains many resources to enhance the study of the Book of Abraham, including a complete on-line text, cross-referenced to the rest of the scriptures of the LDS Church, as well as on-line texts of hundreds of Church publications.

NOTES

1. Parley P. Pratt, *Millennial Star*, III (July, 1842), pp. 46–47. It is worth noting that this is a publication and not a personal letter, it was widely distributed, and that Joseph Smith never contradicted Pratt's comments. This leads me to conclude that it is more likely that this perspective was also shared by Joseph Smith—that the papyrus was not necessarily authored by Abraham, and that the Egyptians did not immediately bury the text, no more to be seen until its uncovering in the 1800s.

2. R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1993), 11.

3. *Ibid.*, 15

4. *Ibid.*, 12.

5. John Gee, "A Tragedy of Errors," in "FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon," Vol. 4, 1992: 97–98. The footnote 27 in the citation is relevant and reads as follows: "Henry Caswall, 'The Mormons,' *The Visitor or Monthly Instructor for 1842* (1842): 406. Though Caswall freely embellished his accounts later (see Hugh Nibley, 'The Greek Psalter Mystery or Mr. Caswall Meets in the Press,' in *Tinkling Symbols and Sounding Brass*, 11:304–406); this one is contemporary, and from his description of Joseph Smith Papyrus IIIA-B we know that he had seen the papyri and not just the book of Abraham facsimiles. It does not matter, by the way, whether the priest is shown with an Anubis mask or not; he is still a priest; Christine Seeber, 'Maske,' *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 7 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1977–89), 3:1196–99."

6. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), p. 22. Gee includes six photographs which “show that the characters (1) were written in different ink than the English text ..., (2) do not line up with the English text ..., and (3) run over the margins ... and sometimes the English text.... This indicates that the Egyptian characters were added after the English text was written, perhaps to decorate the beginnings of paragraphs, although the reason for their inclusion was never explicitly stated”
7. It is worth noting that IRR has published a review of the work on their Web site.
8. John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri” in *Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 200), 175–217.
9. For a description and assessment of the journal entry, see John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri” in *Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 200), 175-217. The actual dimensions of the papyri as suggested by Gee are 13 cm X 320 cm. Only 68 cm of text are extant.
10. Dr. John A. Wilson, *Dialogue*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1968, p. 67) See also: John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), p. 10-13 where we find these alternate spellings: Hor, Semminis, Noufianoub, Sheshonq and Amenophis.
11. Parley P. Pratt, *Millennial Star*, III (July, 1842), pp. 46-47. See additional comments in footnote 1.
12. The theory as quoted in the film reads as follows (material in bold was omitted in the film, but is relevant to the discussion): **“One must consider, however, what Joseph Smith meant by translation. Section 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants offers one standard measure. Here, the Prophet, using the Urim and Thummim, translated a record made on parchment by John the Revelator.” Although it is not known whether Joseph Smith actually had this document, he provided a translation of it. Since it is not known just how Joseph Smith translated, it is reasonable to postulate that**, when studying the Egyptian papyri purchased from Michael Chandler, Joseph Smith sought revelation from the Lord concerning them and received in that process the Book of Abraham. He might then have searched through the papyri in his possession to find illustrations similar to those he had learned by revelation.” (Michael D. Rhodes, “Facsimiles from the Book of Abraham,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. [New York: Macmillan, 1992], 1:136.)
13. Diary of Joseph Smith, October 1, 1835, p.3; also in *DHC* Vol. 2:286
14. Diary of Joseph Smith, October 7, 1835, p. 7; also in *DHC* 2:289
15. Diary of Joseph Smith, November 19, 1835, p. 47; also *DHC* 2:318
16. Diary of Joseph Smith, November 24, 1835, p. 49; also *DHC* 2:320
17. “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.” *DHC* Vol. 2:238
18. The following is a summary of the documents that are commonly known as the Kirtland Egyptian Papers. (see Nibley, *BYU Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4, p. 350, fn). I refer to them all as KEP, numbering the BoA MSS as KEP #11-14: Egyptian MSS #1, ca. 1837, 1 volume (220 pages), entitled Grammar & Alphabet [sic] of the Egyptian Language, in the handwriting of W.W. Phelps and Warren Parrish. Egyptian MSS #2, ca. 1837, entitled Egyptian Counting in the handwriting of W.W. Phelps. Characters with English explanations. Egyptian MSS #3, ca 1837, entitled Egyptian Alphabet in the handwriting of W.W. Phelps. Egyptian MSS #4, ca. 1837, entitled Egyptian Alphabet in the handwriting of Joseph Smith. Egyptian. MSS #5, ca. 1837, in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery, top is deteriorated, but similarities between #5 and #4 indicate that it was probably also entitled Egyptian Alphabet. Egyptian MSS #6, ca. 1837, 1 vol., entitled Valuable Discovery of hidden [sic] records (title in the hand of Joseph Smith) contents in the hand of Oliver Cowdery. Egyptian MSS #7, ca. 1837, 1 vol., English contents in the hand of Oliver Cowdery. Egyptian MSS #8, ca 1837, (1 fold), Egyptian characters and hieroglyphics. Egyptian MSS #9, ca 1837, Characters by an unknown hand. Egyptian papyri #10, Egyptian papyrus attached to a sheet of paper. BoA Manuscript #1, ca 1837, 10p. Translation of the Book of Abraham 1:1 to 2:18 in the handwriting of W.W. Phelps and Warren Parrish. BoA Manuscript #2, ca 1837, 4p, Book of Abraham 1:4 to 2:6 in the handwriting of W.W. Phelps. BoA Manuscript #3, ca 1837, 6p, Book of Abraham 1:4 to 2:2 in the handwriting of Warren Parrish. BoA Manuscript #4, ca 1841, Book of Abraham 1:1 to 3:26 in the handwriting of Willard Richards.
19. John A. Wilson, “A Summary Report,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3/2 (Summer 1968): 67-85 at 67.
20. Parley P. Pratt, *Millennial Star*, III (July, 1842), pp. 46-47. See additional comments in footnote 1.
21. “Also, that there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted *Seers* in ancient or former times; and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book.” As recorded in the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith attached to all current copies of the Book of Mormon and available from the Official LDS Web site at www.lds.org.

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The Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research (FAIR) is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing well-documented answers to criticisms of LDS doctrine, belief and practice. Seeking to assist the lay member and scholar alike to respond to intentional and well-meaning attacks on individual faith, FAIR helps pub-

lish articles and books that defend the LDS church, operates a Web site that receives thousands of visitors each day, and sponsors research projects and conferences that provide the LDS scholarly community an outlet for getting information into the hands of the average member. With a 501-C3 tax exempt status from the IRS, FAIR is funded by the generosity of its members and contributors, now grown to more than 2,000.

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