Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints embraces the book of Abraham as scripture. This book, a record of the biblical prophet and patriarch Abraham, recounts how Abraham sought the blessings of the priesthood, rejected the idolatry of his father, covenanted with Jehovah, married Sarai, moved to Canaan and Egypt, and received knowledge about the Creation. The book of Abraham largely follows the biblical narrative but adds important information regarding Abraham's life and teachings.

The book of Abraham was first published in 1842 and was canonized as part of the Pearl of Great Price in 1880. The book originated with Egyptian papyri that Joseph Smith translated beginning in 1835. Many people saw the papyri, but no eyewitness account of the translation survives, making it impossible to reconstruct the process. Only small fragments of the long papyrus scrolls once in Joseph Smith's possession exist today. The relationship between those fragments and the text we have today is largely a matter of conjecture.

We do know some things about the translation process. The word translation typically assumes an expert knowledge of multiple languages. Joseph Smith claimed no expertise in any language. He readily acknowledged that he was one of the “weak things of the world,” called to speak words sent “from heaven.” Speaking of the translation of the Book of Mormon, the Lord said, “You cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me.” The same principle can be applied to the book of Abraham. The Lord did not require Joseph Smith to have knowledge of Egyptian. By the gift and power of God, Joseph received knowledge about the life and teachings of Abraham.

On many particulars, the book of Abraham is consistent with historical knowledge about the ancient world. Some of this knowledge, which is discussed later in this essay, had not yet been discovered or was not well known in 1842. But even this evidence of ancient origins, substantial though it may be, cannot prove the truthfulness of the book of Abraham any more than archaeological evidence can prove the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt or the Resurrection of the Son of God. The book of Abraham’s status as scripture ultimately rests on faith in the saving truths found within the book itself as witnessed by the Holy Ghost.

The Book of Abraham as Scripture

Thousands of years ago, the prophet Nephi learned that one purpose of the Book of Mormon was to “establish the truth” of the Bible. In a similar way, the book of Abraham supports, expands, and clarifies the biblical account of Abraham’s life.

In the biblical account, God covenants with Abraham to “make of thee a great nation.” The book of Abraham provides context for that covenant by showing that Abraham was a seeker of “great knowledge” and a “follower of righteousness” who chose the right path in spite of great hardship. He rejected the wickedness of
his father’s household and spurned the idols of the surrounding culture, despite the threat of death.6

In the Bible, God’s covenant with Abraham appears to begin during Abraham’s life. According to the book of Abraham, the covenant began before the foundation of the earth and was passed down through Adam, Noah, and other prophets.7 Abraham thus takes his place in a long line of prophets and patriarchs whose mission is to preserve and extend God’s covenant on earth. The heart of this covenant is the priesthood, through which “the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” are conveyed.8

The book of Abraham clarifies several teachings that are obscure in the Bible. Life did not begin at birth, as is commonly believed. Prior to coming to earth, individuals existed as spirits. In a vision, Abraham saw that one of the spirits was “like unto God.”9 This divine being, Jesus Christ, led other spirits in organizing the earth out of “materials” or preexisting matter, not ex nihilo or out of nothing, as many Christians later came to believe.10 Abraham further learned that mortal life was crucial to the plan of happiness God would provide for His children: “We will prove them herewith,” God stated, “to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them,” adding a promise to add glory forever upon the faithful.11 Nowhere in the Bible is the purpose and potential of earth life stated so clearly as in the book of Abraham.

**Origin of the Book of Abraham**

The powerful truths found in the book of Abraham emerged from a set of unique historical events. In the summer of 1835, an entrepreneur named Michael Chandler arrived at Church headquarters in Kirtland, Ohio, with four mummies and multiple scrolls of papyrus.12 Chandler found a ready audience. Due partly to the exploits of the French emperor Napoleon, the antiquities unearthed in the catacombs of Egypt had created a fascination across the Western world.13 Chandler capitalized on this interest by touring with ancient Egyptian artifacts and charging visitors a fee to see them.

These artifacts had been uncovered by Antonio Lebolo, a former cavalryman in the Italian army. Lebolo, who oversaw some of the excavations for the consul general of France, pulled 11 mummies from a tomb not far from the ancient city of Thebes. Lebolo shipped the artifacts to Italy, and after his death, they ended up in New York. At some point the mummies and scrolls came into Chandler’s possession.14

By the time the collection arrived in Kirtland, all but four mummies and several papyrus scrolls had already been sold. A group of Latter-day Saints in Kirtland purchased the remaining artifacts for the Church. After Joseph Smith examined the papyri and commenced “the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics,” his history recounts, “much to our joy [we] found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham.”15

**Translation and the Book of Abraham**

Joseph Smith worked on the translation of the book of Abraham during the summer and fall of 1835, by which time he completed at least the first chapter and
part of the second chapter. His journal next speaks of translating the papyri in the spring of 1842, after the Saints had relocated to Nauvoo, Illinois. All five chapters of the book of Abraham, along with three illustrations (now known as facsimiles 1, 2, and 3), were published in the Times and Seasons, the Church’s newspaper in Nauvoo, between March and May 1842.

The book of Abraham was the last of Joseph Smith’s translation efforts. In these inspired translations, Joseph Smith did not claim to know the ancient languages of the records he was translating. Much like the Book of Mormon, Joseph’s translation of the book of Abraham was recorded in the language of the King James Bible. This was the idiom of scripture familiar to early Latter-day Saints, and its use was consistent with the Lord’s pattern of revealing His truths “after the manner of their [His servants’] language, that they might come to understanding.”

Joseph’s translations took a variety of forms. Some of his translations, like that of the Book of Mormon, utilized ancient documents in his possession. Other times, his translations were not based on any known physical records. Joseph’s translation of portions of the Bible, for example, included restoration of original text, harmonization of contradictions within the Bible itself, and inspired commentary.

Some evidence suggests that Joseph studied the characters on the Egyptian papyri and attempted to learn the Egyptian language. His history reports that, in July 1835, he 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.” This “grammar,” as it was called, consisted of columns of hieroglyphic characters followed by English translations recorded in a large notebook by Joseph’s scribe, William W. Phelps. Another manuscript, written by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, has Egyptian characters followed by explanations.

The relationship of these documents to the book of Abraham is not fully understood. Neither the rules nor
the translations in the grammar book correspond to those recognized by Egyptologists today. Whatever the role of the grammar book, it appears that Joseph Smith began translating portions of the book of Abraham almost immediately after the purchase of the papyri.22 Phelps apparently viewed Joseph Smith as uniquely capable of understanding the Egyptian characters: “As no one could translate these writings,” he told his wife, “they were presented to President Smith. He soon knew what they were.”23

The Papyri

After the Latter-day Saints left Nauvoo, the Egyptian artifacts remained behind. Joseph Smith’s family sold the papyri and the mummies in 1856. The papyri were divided up and sold to various parties; historians believe that most were destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Ten papyrus fragments once in Joseph Smith’s possession ended up in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.24 In 1967, the museum transferred these fragments to the Church, which subsequently published them in the Church’s magazine, the Improvement Era.25

The discovery of the papyrus fragments renewed debate about Joseph Smith’s translation. The fragments included one vignette, or illustration, that appears in the book of Abraham as facsimile 1. Long before the fragments were published by the Church, some Egyptologists had said that Joseph Smith’s explanations of the various elements of these facsimiles did not match their own interpretations of these drawings. Joseph Smith had published the facsimiles as freestanding drawings, cut off from the hieroglyphs or hieratic characters that originally surrounded the vignettes. The discovery of the fragments meant that readers could now see the hieroglyphs and characters immediately surrounding the vignette that became facsimile 1.26

None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mentioned Abraham’s name or any of the events recorded in the book of Abraham. Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the book of Abraham, though there is not unanimity, even among non-Mormon scholars, about the proper interpretation of the vignettes on these fragments.27 Scholars have identified the papyrus fragments as parts of standard funerary texts that were deposited with mumified bodies. These fragments date to between the third century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., long after Abraham lived.

Of course, the fragments do not have to be as old as Abraham for the book of Abraham and its illustrations to be authentic. Ancient records are often transmitted as copies or as copies of copies. The record of Abraham could have been edited or redacted by later writers much as the Book of Mormon prophet-historians Mormon and Moroni revised the writings of earlier peoples.28 Moreover, documents initially composed for one context can be repackaged for another context or purpose.29 Illustrations once connected with Abraham could have either drifted or been dislodged from their
original context and reinterpreted hundreds of years later in terms of burial practices in a later period of Egyptian history. The opposite could also be true: illustrations with no clear connection to Abraham anciently could, by revelation, shed light on the life and teachings of this prophetic figure.

Some have assumed that the hieroglyphs adjacent to and surrounding facsimile 1 must be a source for the text of the book of Abraham. But this claim rests on the assumption that a vignette and its adjacent text must be associated in meaning. In fact, it was not uncommon for ancient Egyptian vignettes to be placed some distance from their associated commentary.

Neither the Lord nor Joseph Smith explained the process of translation of the book of Abraham, but some insight can be gained from the Lord’s instructions to Joseph regarding translation. In April 1829, Joseph received a revelation for Oliver Cowdery that taught that both intellectual work and revelation were essential to translating sacred records. It was necessary to “study it out in your mind” and then seek spiritual confirmation. Records indicate that Joseph and others studied the papyri and that close observers also believed that the translation came by revelation. As John Whitmer observed, “Joseph the Seer saw these Record[s] and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records.”

It is likely futile to assess Joseph’s ability to translate papyri when we now have only a fraction of the papyri he had in his possession. Eyewitnesses spoke of “a long roll” or multiple “rolls” of papyrus. Since only fragments survive, it is likely that much of the papyri accessible to Joseph when he translated the book of Abraham is not among these fragments. The loss of a significant portion of the papyri means the relationship of the papyri to the published text cannot be settled conclusively by reference to the papyri.

Alternatively, Joseph’s study of the papyri may have led to a revelation about key events and teachings in the life of Abraham, much as he had earlier received a revelation about the life of Moses while studying the Bible. This view assumes a broader definition of the words translator and translation. According to this view, Joseph’s translation was not a literal rendering of the papyri as a conventional translation would be. Rather, the physical artifacts provided an occasion for meditation, reflection, and revelation. They catalyzed a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation about the life of Abraham, even if that revelation did not directly correlate to the characters on the papyri.

The Book of Abraham and the Ancient World

A careful study of the book of Abraham provides a better measure of the book’s merits than any hypothesis that treats the text as a conventional translation. Evidence suggests that elements of the book of Abraham fit comfortably in the ancient world and supports the claim that the book of Abraham is an authentic record.

The book of Abraham speaks disapprovingly of human sacrifice offered on an altar in Chaldea. Some victims were placed on the altar as sacrifices because they rejected the idols worshipped by their leaders. Recent scholarship has found instances of such punishment dating to Abraham’s time. People who challenged the standing religious order, either in Egypt or in the regions over which it had influence (such as Canaan), could and did suffer execution for their offenses. The conflict over the religion of Pharaoh, as described in Abraham 1:11–12, is an example of punishment now known to have been meted out during the Abrahamic era.

The book of Abraham contains other details that are consistent with modern discoveries about the ancient world. The book speaks of “the plain of Olishem,” a name not mentioned in the Bible. An ancient inscription, not discovered and translated until the 20th century, mentions a town called “Ulisum,” located in northwestern Syria. Further, Abraham 3:22–23 is written in a poetic structure more characteristic of Near Eastern languages than early American writing style.

Joseph Smith’s explanations of the facsimiles of the book of Abraham contain additional earmarks of the ancient world. Facsimile 1 and Abraham 1:17 mention the idolatrous god Elkenah. This deity is not mentioned in the Bible, yet modern scholars have identified it as being among the gods worshipped by ancient Mesopotamians. Joseph Smith represented the four figures in figure 6 of facsimile 2 as “this earth in its four quarters.” A similar interpretation has been argued by scholars who study identical figures in other ancient Egyptian
Book of Abraham

texts. Facsimile 1 contains a crocodile deity swimming in what Joseph Smith called “the firmament over our heads.” This interpretation makes sense in light of scholarship that identifies Egyptian conceptions of heaven with “a heavenly ocean.”

The book of Abraham is consistent with various details found in nonbiblical stories about Abraham that circulated in the ancient world around the time the papyri were likely created. In the book of Abraham, God teaches Abraham about the sun, the moon, and the stars. “I show these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt,” the Lord says, “that ye may declare all these words.”

Ancient texts repeatedly refer to Abraham instructing the Egyptians in knowledge of the heavens. For example, Eupolemus, who lived under Egyptian rule in the second century B.C.E., wrote that Abraham taught astronomy and other sciences to the Egyptian priests. A third-century papyrus from an Egyptian temple library connects Abraham with an illustration similar to facsimile 1 in the book of Abraham. A later Egyptian text, discovered in the 20th century, tells how the Pharaoh tried to sacrifice Abraham, only to be foiled when Abraham was delivered by an angel. Later, according to this text, Abraham taught members of the Pharaoh’s court through astronomy. All these details are found in the book of Abraham.

Other details in the book of Abraham are found in ancient traditions located across the Near East. These include Terah, Abraham’s father, being an idolator; a famine striking Abraham’s homeland; Abraham’s familiarity with Egyptian idols; and Abraham’s being younger than 75 years old when he left Haran, as the biblical account states. Some of these extrabiblical elements were available in apocryphal books or biblical commentaries in Joseph Smith’s lifetime, but others were confined to nonbiblical traditions inaccessible or unknown to 19th-century Americans.

Conclusion

The veracity and value of the book of Abraham cannot be settled by scholarly debate concerning the book’s translation and historicity. The book’s status as scripture lies in the eternal truths it teaches and the powerful spirit it conveys. The book of Abraham imparts profound truths about the nature of God, His relationship to us as His children, and the purpose of this mortal life.

The truth of the book of Abraham is ultimately found through careful study of its teachings, sincere prayer, and the confirmation of the Spirit.

Resources
1. Doctrine and Covenants 1:17, 19, 24.
4. 1 Nephi 13:40. See also Mormon 7:8–9.
5. Genesis 12:2.
6. Abraham 1:1–2, 5–12.
17. Joseph Smith, Journal, March 8–9, 1842, available at josephsmithpapers.org; “A Fac-Simile from

19. Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 253. In Joseph Smith’s day, the word translate could mean “to interpret; to render into another language.” The word interpret could mean “to explain the meaning of words to a person who does not understand them,” or “to explain or unfold the meaning of predictions, visions, dreams or enigmas; to expound and lay open what is concealed from the understanding.” (Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language [New York: S. Converse, 1828], s.v. “Translate,” “Interpret.”)

21. Transcriptions and digital images of these manuscripts, known collectively as the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” can be found at “Book of Abraham and Egyptian Material,” josephsmithpapers.org.
24. John Gee, A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 2. The fragments are known to have been part of the papyri owned by the Church because they were mounted on paper with early Mormon records, which conforms to contemporary descriptions of the display of the papyri.
25. Jay M. Todd, “New Light on Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papyri,” Improvement Era, Feb. 1968, 40–41. Another fragment was located in the Church Historian’s Office around the same time as the Metropolitan discovery, making 11 fragments in all.
28. Joseph Smith, or perhaps a colleague, introduced the published translation by saying that the records were “written by his [Abraham’s] own hand, upon papyrus.” The phrase can be understood to mean that Abraham is the author and not the literal copyist. Hugh Nibley and Michael Rhodes, One Eternal Round (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2010), 20–22; Michael D. Rhodes, “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles,” Religious Educator 4, no. 2 (2003): 117–18.


34. By analogy, the Bible seems to have been a frequent catalyst for Joseph Smith’s revelations about God’s dealings with His ancient covenant people. Joseph’s study of the book of Genesis, for example, prompted revelations about the lives and teachings of Adam, Eve, Moses, and Enoch, found today in the book of Moses.

35. Abraham 1:8, 10–11. Most scholars today locate “Chaldea” (or Ur) in southern Mesopotamia, removed from the area of Egyptian influence, but cogent arguments have been made for a northern location, within the realm of Egyptian influence. (Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?” in H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1989], 119–36; and Nibley, Abraham in Egypt, 84–85, 234–36.)


From Kirtland, Ohio, to Far West, Missouri: Following the Trail of the Mormon Mummies
by Ray Huntington and Keith J. Wilson

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The story detailing the discovery of the Egyptian mummies in Upper Egypt, together with the papyrus scrolls, their subsequent purchase by the Latter-day Saints in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835, and Joseph Smith’s translation of the papyrus scroll containing the writings of Abraham, is a fascinating and important narrative. However, the focus of this paper will be to outline briefly the history of the four Egyptian mummies during the Kirtland and Missouri periods of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Kirtland Period

During the decades of 1820 and 1830, a number of Egyptian mummies were shipped to the United States for commercial display. Michael Chandler, an Irish immigrant, purportedly acquired eleven mummies from his Italian relative, Antonio Lebolo. By 1833, Chandler was moving from one city to the next, displaying his mummies in commercial exhibits. Newspaper ads indicate that his venues included Philadelphia in April 1833, Baltimore in July/August 1833, and Harrisburg in September 1833. Eventually, Mr. Chandler settled in Stow, Ohio—not far from the Mormon settlement of Kirtland. Here he resumed his traveling exhibit, making stops in Cleveland and vicinity during the spring of 1835. As of that date, his collection had dwindled from eleven to only four mummies, and he openly offered to sell them along with the ancient papyri.

During Chandler’s travels, he was informed of Joseph Smith’s translation work with the Book of Mormon. When Chandler arrived in Kirtland, he specifically invited Joseph to come and view the collection. After examining the artifacts, Joseph asked if he could purchase only the papyri, but Chandler denied that request. The price for the mummies and papyri was a considerable sum of $2,400.2 Nevertheless, a group of members and nonmembers emerged and purchased...
the Egyptian antiquities. With papyri in hand, Joseph Smith recorded: “Soon after . . . the Saints at Kirtland purchased the mummies and papyrus, . . . and with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdrey as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphs, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt.”

Although Joseph Smith may have initially kept the mummies at his residence in Kirtland, by mid-October of 1835, they had been moved to the home of Frederick G. Williams. The movement of the mummies to the Williams’ home is substantiated by several statements made by the Prophet:

Saturday, October 24: Mr. Goodrich and wife called to see the ancient [Egyptian] records, and also Dr. Frederick G. Williams to see the mummies.

Thursday, October 29: Returned to our writing room, went to Dr. Williams’ after my large journal; made some observations to my scribe concerning the plan of the city, which is to be built up hereafter on this ground consecrated for a Stake of Zion.

While at the doctor’s, Bishop Edward Partridge came in company with President Phelps. I was much rejoiced to see him. We examined the mummies, returned home, and my scribe commenced writing in my journal.

Tuesday, November 17: Exhibited the alphabet of the ancient records, to Mr. Holmes, and some others. Went with him to Frederick G. Williams’, to see the mummies.

Apparently, the mummies may have been kept at the residence of Frederick G. Williams from October 1835 to mid-February 1836—at which time they were delivered to Joseph Coe, a member of the first high council of the Church in Kirtland (see D&C 102:3). Regarding this event, Joseph Smith stated:

Elder Coe called to make some arrangements about the Egyptian mummies and records. He proposes to hire a room at John Johnson’s Inn, and exhibit them there from day to day, at certain hours, that some benefit may be derived from them. I complied with his request, and only observed that they must be managed with prudence and care, especially the manuscripts.

Joseph Coe had earlier contributed $800 of the $2,400 needed to purchase the mummies and papyri from Michael Chandler in July 1835. It was probably Coe’s intention to exhibit the antiquities at Johnson’s Inn so he could recover some of the $800 he had loaned for the purchase of the mummies and papyri. The fact that the mummies were to be exhibited at an inn, a rest stop for travelers and strangers, clearly prompted the Prophet to counsel Coe to manage the mummies and papyri with “prudence and care.”

Little, if any, information is known about Coe’s venture to exhibit the mummies at John Johnson’s Inn. How long the mummies remained in Joseph Coe’s possession remains a mystery. What is known, however, is that both the mummies and the papyri were moved to the upper floor of the Kirtland Temple sometime prior to or following its dedication on 26 March 1836. This fact is affirmed by a statement in the History of the Church on 2 November 1837 as well as in a journal entry by Wilford Woodruff, who viewed both the mummies and papyri during a visit to the temple:

Thursday, November 2, 1837: The Church in Kirtland voted to sanction the appointment of Brother
Phineas Richards and Reuben Hedlock, by the Presidency, to transact business for the Church in procuring means to translate and print the records taken from the Catacombs of Egypt, then in the Temple.10

Elder Smoot and myself visited each appartment of the House accompanied by Elder Parrish & I must confess the scenery is indisscribable. When I entered the threshold of the house & Passed into the lower room their was great solemnity if not awe immediately overwhelmed me. I felt indeed as if my footsteps were in the Temple of the Lord. After walking into the Pulpets erected for the Priesthoods & viewing the curtains all bespeaking that grandure, solemnity & order that nothing short of wisdom from God could invent. We then visited the upper rooms & there viewed four Egyptian Mumies & also the Book of Abram written by his own hand & not owly the hieroglyphicks but also many figures that this precious treasure contains are calculated to make a lasting impression upon the mind which is not to be erased.11

It also appears that as early as December 1835, Joseph Smith had planned to use a room in the temple as both a repository for the mummies/papyri and a place for translation. In his journal on Thursday, 31 December, Joseph observed: “In the after noon I attended at the Chapel to give directions concerning the upper rooms, and more especially the west room which I intend occupying, for a translating room, which will be prepared this week.”12

The Kirtland Temple would have been an ideal location to translate the ancient texts as well as store the mummies and papyri together. However, neither the temple nor Kirtland itself would remain places of tranquility and peace. By the summer of 1837, just three or four months following the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the seeds of apostasy were sown among a significant number of Church members. The temple itself was scene to several heated debates between those faithful to Joseph and those who opposed him. Eliza R. Snow described one such event:

Soon after the usual opening services, one of the brethren on the west stand arose, and just after he commenced to speak, one on the east interrupted him. Father Smith, presiding, called for order—he told the apostate brother that he should have all the time he wanted, but he must wait his turn—as the brother on the west took the floor and commenced first to speak, he must not be interrupted. A fearful scene ensued—the apostate speaker becoming so clamorous that Father Smith called for the police to take that man out of the house, when Parrish, John Boynton, and others, drew their pistols and bowie-knives, and rushed down from the stand into the congregation; John Boynton saying he would blow out the brains of the first man who dared to lay hands on him. Many in the congregation, especially women and children, were terribly frightened—some tried to escape from the confusion by jumping out of the windows. Amid screams and shrieks, the policemen, in ejecting the belligerents, knocked down a stove-pipe, which fell helter-skelter among the people; but, although bowie-knives and pistols were wrested from their owners, and thrown hither and thither to prevent disastrous results, no one was hurt, and after a short, but terrible scene to be enacted in a temple of God, order was restored, and the services of the day proceeded as usual.13

As a result of the apostates’ hatred and opposition to Joseph and other key leaders of the Church, Joseph was forced to leave Kirtland on the night of 12 January 1838. Following his departure, the apostates sought to seize control of properties belonging to the Prophet or the Church. Regarding these events, Lucy Mack Smith said:

Their first movement was to sue Joseph for debt, and, with this pretense, seize upon every piece of property belonging to any of the family. Joseph then had in his possession four Egyptian mummies, with some ancient records that accompanied them. These the mob swore they would take, and then burn every one of them. Accordingly, they obtained an execution upon them for an unjust debt of fifty dollars; but, by various stratagems, we succeeded in keeping them out of their hands.14

One of the strategies referred to by Lucy Smith involved hiding the mummies and papyri in the homes of Latter-day Saints still living in the Kirtland area. One such home was that of William Huntington. Oliver B. Huntington, a son of William, recorded the following:

This same Fall of 1837 the Kirtland Bank broke and with it Kirtland broke and the Devil broke out among the members of the Church. Many of the leading Elders apostatized and turned against the Prophet seeking to
take his life, but God warned him to rise up by night and depart for Missouri which he did and as fast as possible all the faithful followed, and those who could not go but were forced to stay another winter were hunted, harrassed, robed and mobed by apostates and among that number I was one although at the same time my house was a hiding place for old father Joseph Smith his sons Carlos and Samuel and many others. In my house the mummies and Egyptian Records were hid to keep them from sworn destruction by apostates.15

It appears that while the mummies were in the Huntington home, they were stored for a time under the bed of Zina Diantha, a daughter of William Huntington. The following is descriptive of Zina's bedtime routine with the four mummies stored under her bed:

Candle in hand, Zina opened the door of her dark bedroom. In the dim light, she could see the four black shapes protruding from under the big, hand-carved wooden bed. They were sarcophagi, each containing the mummified body of an ancient Egyptian—enough to frighten the sleep out of any teenage youngster.

But Zina was not to be frightened by a few mummies, Egyptian or otherwise. She set her candlestick down on the chest of drawers, matter-of-factly dressed for bed and went to sleep wondering if the permanent sleepers beneath her had been nobles or kings or just ordinary folk like herself.16

With the collapse of the Mormon community at Kirtland, those who remained loyal to this nascent faith either left town or went into hiding. This hurried departure necessitated leaving the mummies and papyri secretly hidden at William Huntington's home in New Portage, Ohio, which was about twenty miles south of Kirkland. In the absence of the Prophet Joseph, it appears that his parents were entrusted with the care of the Egyptian artifacts.

During this same time, a pair of brothers, Edwin and Samuel Woolley, became interested in Mormonism. Edwin had heard the missionaries preach and felt compelled to meet the Mormon Prophet. Edwin arrived too late at Kirtland, but he did manage to locate Joseph Smith Sr. at the Huntington home.

Edwin convinced Father Smith, according to Edwin's brother Samuel, “to bring the mummies and the Record of Abraham” with him to his home in Rochester, Ohio.17 A wagon was hired to transport the artifacts, and Father Smith commenced a lengthy stay with the Woolleys that winter of 1837–38. His absence prompted his wife Lucy Mack to send son William to locate him.18 After rejoining the family, they began their slow journey to Missouri, arriving at Far West during July 1838.

The Missouri Period

What became of the mummies and the ancient writings during the Missouri period becomes somewhat obscured. One pioneer writer omits the entire Missouri episode, claiming that the mummies went directly from the Kirtland area to Nauvoo.19 However, a handful of others document that the mummies passed through Missouri during 1838.

Samuel Woolley is perhaps the most forthright Missouri source. He records in his diary that he transported the mummies and papyri from Kirtland (or Rochester, Ohio) to Far West.20 His statement seems plausible, even though no other accounts confirm his claim. Two additional facts do raise significant questions about Woolley's statement. First, the Woolley brothers did not officially join the Church until 1840 in Nauvoo. With the recognized financial value of these artifacts, would they have been entrusted to newcomers with no formal Church commitments? And second, the pattern of guardianship during this period points consistently to Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith as being overseers of the mummies. Joseph's parents are the last to have the artifacts during the Kirtland era, and they are the first to be mentioned with them as the Nauvoo period commences. Why then would they have not retained them during the Missouri period?

On the other hand, perhaps the Woolley claim can be reconciled with these loyalty and guardianship issues. What if Father Smith journeyed to Missouri in tandem with the Woolley brothers? None of the extant pioneer journals make reference to such a joint effort, but it does have some circumstantial support. For instance, Edwin Woolley did have the means to hire a wagon and transport the mummies from New Portage to Rochester just after the trouble began—why not then from Rochester to Far West? Also, either Joseph Sr. was quite comfortable with the Woolleys or he liked their
cooking because Lucy Mack had to summon him to return home during the winter of 1838. Both of these facts point toward a mutual trust and relationship between the Smiths and the Woolleys, even though the journals remain silent on any joint venture.

The first account of the mummies in Missouri comes from an anti-Mormon writer, a William Swartzell. He wrote on 24 May 1838 from Richmond's landing, “This is the place where the Mormons land their goods for transportation across the country. I saw there Joseph Smith's box of mummies.” Two months later, he observed that they were gathering logs for a house where Joseph would translate the “hieroglyphics of the Egyptian mummies.” Even though he was bent on criticizing Mormonism, he does record the first sighting of the box of mummies.

The only other mention of the Egyptian artifacts in Missouri comes from Anson Call, who visited Far West sometime during the summer of 1838. He recalls seeing the papyri in John Corrill's store and then, with the help of Vincent Knight, carrying them in boxes to Joseph's office. There they found Joseph with a number of the brethren. Joseph was delighted to receive the records; and then, as a group, they read from the book of Abraham for the space of two hours. This account is especially significant because of a sympathetic record keeper who actually saw the papyri.

When these previous two references are excluded, no other mention is made of the artifacts in Missouri. On one occasion, the Prophet did preach using the book of Abraham to explain some of “the mysteries of the kingdom of God; such as the history of the planets, Abraham's writings upon the planetary systems, etc.” This entry verifies that notwithstanding their whereabouts, the writings of Abraham were not forgotten even during the brief Missouri period.

The notorious “Order of Extermination” on 27 October 1838 sounded the exodus for the Saints once again. Shortly thereafter, Joseph Jr. relocated his family to the border town of Quincy, Illinois. He remained behind in Missouri and was imprisoned in the Liberty Jail during the winter of 1838–39. The mummies and papyri were once again entrusted to Joseph Sr. and Lucy, as attested by Henry Ashbury, a non-Mormon writer in the Quincy area. He described the scene rather derogatorily:

The winter passed in quietness and the Mormons were on their good behavior. Old Daddy Smith and his aged wife, Joe Smith's father and mother, rented the house or part of it, situated on the northeast corner of Sixth and Hampshire Streets, and set up a sort of museum of curiosities, consisting mainly of several mummies from Egypt. The old lady charged ten cents admittance and acted as exhibitor, explaining who and what each object really was. I am now unable to accurately give the substance of these explanations by the old lady, but in substance they amounted to an assertion that one or more of the mummies was one of the Pharaohs or kings of Egypt, and there belonged to him some hieroglyphics or writings upon papyrus, which she said in some way proved the truth of Mormonism or something tending in that direction. The show did not seem to pay and did not run long here.

Note the reference to both the mummies and the hieroglyphics/ papyrus. If the artifacts had been previously separated for security purposes, at least they had been reunited by the time of the Quincy/ Nauvoo period.

Conclusion

This analysis reviews, as far as current sources permit, the route of the Egyptian artifacts from Kirtland to Missouri and then to Nauvoo. Of primary interest to this study has been the Missouri period. Even though the source material is scant, evidence exists that the senior Smith family was overseeing the artifacts. The family appears to have accepted support from the Woolley brothers in the Kirtland/Far West transition. It also stands to reason that the mummies and the papyri were separated at times during the short-lived Missouri sojourn. What was anticipated as a time to resume the Abrahamic translations became instead a brief stopover with relentless opposition. Even though the Egyptian artifacts made their way to Missouri, it was a discrete journey with a short stay. It would be in Nauvoo where the sun would shine again upon the mummies and their papyri.

Notes
What Happened to the Mummies and Papyri Joseph Smith Purchased That Led to the Book of Abraham

Brigham Young University historian Dr. John Gee, sheds interesting light on some of the biggest mysteries associated with the Book of Abraham and its translation.

Having studied the topic for over 30 years, he shares intriguing details of Joseph Smith's purchase of the papyri that the Book of Abraham was translated from as well as the Church's acquisition of fragments of the same papyri in the late 1960s.

An interesting part of the history of these papyri and the mummies acquired with them is that "Joseph [Smith] gave them to his mom and let her show them to people for 25 cents," Dr. Gee shares. He continues, "It was a way of providing her with an income" after Joseph Smith Sr. passed away.

Shortly after Lucy Mack Smith died, Emma Smith sold the mummies and papyri, in part because Dr. Gee is convinced she was "sick of having dead bodies laying around the house."


4. Ibid., 2:291.
5. Ibid., 2:293.
6. Ibid., 2:316.
7. Ibid., 2:396.
9. HC, 2:396.
10. Ibid., 2:520–21.
23. HC, 3:27.

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