



Type: Journal Article

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Source: *Journal of Mormon History*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (April 2016), pp. 95-109

Published: University of Illinois Press; Mormon History Association

Abstract: Much has been said, written, and discussed concerning the Joseph Smith Papyri and the Book of Abraham. Indeed, it is somewhat difficult to separate these two topics in any religious or academic discussion. Less often discussed yet similarly relevant are the writings of Joseph of Egypt that were also said to have been on the papyri acquired by the Church of the Latter Day Saints in 1835. To my knowledge, these writings have never been published or preserved, leaving many questions unanswered about the writings of Joseph of Egypt from the papyri. This article explores two of those questions: “What were these writings said to have contained?” and, “Did Joseph Smith ever translate these writings?” My approach in this paper is to collect, evaluate, and compare what eyewitnesses contemporary with the Prophet Joseph Smith have said about the writings of Joseph of Egypt from the papyri. In doing so, I hope to provide a general understanding concerning what early Latter-day Saints understood concerning Joseph’s writings on the Egyptian papyri.

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Quinten Barney

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¹I refer to these documents as the “writings of Joseph,” though they have also been called the “record of Joseph” or “Book of Joseph.”

with the Prophet Joseph Smith have said about the writings of Joseph of Egypt from the papyri. In doing so, I hope to provide a general understanding concerning what early Latter-day Saints understood concerning Joseph's writings on the Egyptian papyri.²

LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

The greatest limitation is that, although the Church acquired some of the original papyri fragments on November 27, 1967, it is impossible to tell how much of the original collection is still missing. John Gee suggests that one scroll may have been as long as twenty-three feet, a length which the total surviving fragments (from multiple scrolls) don't come close to.³ The papyri collection and the mummies did not always stay together, suggesting that more of the original papyri collection may yet be discovered.

A second limitation is that no known translation by Joseph Smith of the writings of Joseph of Egypt exists.⁴ Lacking either the original manuscript or its translation, the eyewitness accounts remain our primary sources.⁵ As with any historical account, their value depends on their accuracy and credibility. Of necessity, then, I pay careful attention to available contextual details accompanying each eyewitness

²The Book of Abraham is arguably the most discussed subcategory of the Joseph Smith papyri. The three facsimiles in the book, including their explanations given by the prophet Joseph Smith, have prompted both LDS and non-LDS scholars alike to either defend or challenge its historicity and claim of ancient origins. Because of this, many LDS approaches to the papyri have often carried an apologetic tone. My approach in this paper is not apologetic but historical—to better illuminate what early Latter-day Saints understood concerning the writings of Joseph and its contents by carefully examining and comparing eyewitness accounts.

³John Gee, "Formulas and Faith," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 1 (2012): 60–65.

⁴This is not to say that the text never was translated. Joseph Smith made multiple demonstrations in which he assumed familiarity with the contents of the text, implying that at least some translation had most likely taken place.

⁵John Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, edited by Andrew H. Hedges, Donald W. Parry, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 175–217.

account; but in general, I accept the descriptions as factually accurate. Since each of the eyewitness accounts assumes the accuracy of the Prophet Joseph Smith's statements concerning the papyri, this study will maintain that assumption as well.

THE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

The Manuscript History of the Church, commissioned by Joseph Smith and compiled sporadically between 1838 and 1856 by various scribes, contains the earliest eyewitness account of the writings of Joseph of Egypt. The entry, dated July 6, 1835, was included by Willard Richards sometime between October 1, 1843 and June 27, 1844, while working on volume B-1 of the Manuscript History, and is cast in the first-person voice of Joseph Smith: "With W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham; another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, &c,—a more full account <of which> will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them. Truly we can say, the Lord is beginning to reveal the abundance of peace and truth."⁶

Joseph Smith had become aware of the writings of Joseph of Egypt just days after their purchase, and his awareness of the writings of Joseph seems to have come only as he began his translation of the papyri. It seems likely, then, that he translated at least a portion of the writings of Joseph (or otherwise received a revelation about them) shortly after their acquisition. This translation enabled the Prophet to identify Joseph of Egypt as the author. The Prophet additionally indicates that "a more full account" would be forthcoming. Apparently he had every intention right from the start to translate and publish the writings of Joseph.

⁶While Joseph's journal is missing entries between December 5, 1834, and September 22, 1835, this source was included by Willard Richards while serving as the Prophet's "private secretary and historian", and thus is almost certainly endorsed by the Prophet Joseph Smith. See the Historical Introduction to History, 1838–1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838], Joseph Smith Papers online, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/?target=X6993> (accessed July 20, 2015). See also *Manuscript History of the Church*, Book 1, p. 596, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City. and Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev. (6 vols., 1902–12, Vol. 7, 1932; rpt., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980 printing), 2:236.

The second account, in chronological order, is a report by John Whitmer, the editor of the *LDS Messenger and Advocate*, when Michael Chandler, who owned the papyri, arrived in Kirtland in either late June or early July, 1835.⁷ Four years earlier, Joseph Smith had appointed Whitmer as the Church historian and recorder, and he kept a record until his excommunication in 1838. His notation about the mummies was written sometime after the arrival of the mummies in Kirtland, but before Whitmer was excommunicated. He records:

About the first of July, 1835, there came a man having four Egyptian Mummies, exhibiting them for curiosities, which was a wonder indeed, having also some words connected with them which were found deposited with the mummies, but there being no one skilled in the Egyptian language therefore could not translate the record. After this exhibition Joseph the Seer saw these records and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records which gave an account of our forefathers, much of which was written by Joseph of Egypt who was sold by his brethren, which when all translated will be a pleasing history and of great value to the Saints.⁸

Whitmer does not mention that the papyri was also associated with the patriarch Abraham; instead, he focuses specifically on Joseph of Egypt, identifying “much” of the account on the Egyptian papyri as Joseph’s history. He was excommunicated March 10, 1838, nearly four years before the Book of Abraham was published in the *Times and Seasons* (March–May of 1842) in Nauvoo. However, the writings of Joseph had not been published by the time of Whitmer’s excommunication, either, suggesting that the Prophet may have placed an early emphasis on the writings of Joseph of Egypt.

The third source is a letter from William W. Phelps in Kirtland to his wife, Sally, in Clay County, Missouri, dated July 19 and 20, 1835, less than a month after the Church’s acquisition of the papyri. Phelps played a major role with much of the Egyptian material currently housed in the LDS Church History Library, and he had worked

⁷John Whitmer, “To the Patrons of the Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate,” *LDS Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 9 (June 1835): 135–37.

⁸John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847, in Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds. *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, Vol. 2 in the Histories series of The Joseph Smith Papers, general editors Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 86.

frequently with Joseph Smith as a clerk or secretary. This activity included acting as the Prophet's scribe for some of the Egyptian documents produced in Kirtland in 1835.⁹ Phelps wrote:

The last of June, four Egyptian mummies were brought here; there were two papyrus rolls, besides some other ancient Egyptian writings with them. As no one could translate these writings, they were presented to President Smith. He soon knew what they were and said they, the "rolls of papyrus," contained the sacred record kept of Joseph in Pharaoh's court in Egypt, and the teachings of Father Abraham. God has so ordered it that these mummies and writings have been brought in the Church and the sacred writing I had just locked up in Brother Joseph's house when your letter came, so I had two consolations of good things in one day. These records of old times, when we translate and print them in a book, will make a good witness for the Book of Mormon. There is nothing secret or hidden that shall not be revealed.¹⁰

Phelps's letter repeats Joseph Smith and John Whitmer's intentions that the records would be published. Like Joseph Smith's account, Phelps describes the writings of Abraham and the writings of Joseph as being on two separate rolls of papyri. Phelps's task of locking up the papyri in the Prophet's home indicates a close connection with both the Prophet and the papyri.

This same letter to Sally includes another insight relating to the writings of Joseph of Egypt. As Phelps expressed his gratitude for a letter he had recently received from Sally, he wrote: "Brother Joseph remarked that it was as easy to shed tears while reading that letter as it was when reading the History of Joseph in Egypt."¹¹

The mention of "History" suggests that Phelps may have been speaking of either the informal "history of Joseph" in Egypt as written in the Old Testament or, even more intriguingly, that he was quoting

⁹Indeed, much of the Egyptian material is in Phelps's handwriting. See Egyptian Alphabet, circa July–circa December 1835, Joseph Smith Papers online, Documents, id: 6742, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/egyptian-alphabet-circa-july-circa-december-1835> (accessed May 17, 2014).

¹⁰W. W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, in "Letters of Faith from Kirtland," edited by Leah Y. Phelps, *Improvement Era* 45, no. 8 (August 1942): 529.

¹¹*Ibid.*

a title on the papyri: “The History of Joseph in Egypt.” The transcription of earliest publication of this letter in the 1942 *Improvement Era* capitalizes “History,” as does Donl Peterson’s later transcription, but it is lowercased in its publication in a 1993 *BYU Studies* article.¹² I have not been able to find the current location of the original letter. However, the assumption that Joseph Smith had been reading the “History of Joseph in Egypt” from the papyri suggests that he was sufficiently familiar with the contents of this scroll so as to be able to compare the emotions he had while reading it to the tears he shed when Phelps shared the contents of Sally’s letter with him.

Joseph Smith, perhaps moved by the combination of Sally’s letter and his reflections on Joseph of Egypt’s history, wrote to her on July 20, 1835, and included the letter in Phelps’s response to Sally of the same date. Assuming that Phelps and Smith wrote to Sally at the same time, then they had had perhaps five or six weeks to become familiar with the papyri. While Joseph’s letter to Sally does not mention Joseph of Egypt, it provides context for Phelps’s letter, including a few significant textual similarities. Note that both Phelps and Joseph Smith mention “hidden” and “things of old times,” textual similarities indicating that Joseph Smith was alluding to the papyri.

I consider in some degree how great a trial you must have in this seperation [sic], but I think I may safely say, that you may rest with a firm reliance that God will so order it that you may not be separated only but for a short season, and then <your Joy will be full> and if faithful <he will> return and teach you things that have been hid from the wise and prudent, hiden [sic] things of old times, as Moses saist [sic] [in] Deut. 33d <chap> 19th verse for they shall suck of the abundance of [these] as and of the treasures hid in the sand. Some of the[se] things have begun [to] come forth therefore Lift up your heart and be glad.¹³

¹²H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 4. See also Phelps, “Letters of Faith from Kirtland,” 529, and Bruce A. Van Orden, “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836),” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 8–10.

¹³W. W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, July 20, 1835, Joseph Smith Papers online, Documents, id: 262, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-sally-phelps-20-july-1835> (accessed May 17, 2014). I have eliminated some occurrences of [sic].

Like Phelps's letter, Joseph's also communicates excitement in regard to the "hidden things of old times" that were about to come forth. Phelps's impression that both the records of Abraham and Joseph were of "old times," coupled with Joseph's description of them as "hiden" suggests that the information would likely be new to the early Saints.

Thus far, the eyewitness accounts have provided information concerning the writings of Joseph and the papyri in general. The fourth document, written four months later on November 1, 1835, by convert Albert Brown to his parents provides further information on the papyri's actual contents: "I will relate one incident that happened not long since in our favour by some men that had four egyptian mummis which th[e]y were carr[y]ing through the world to exhibiat and also an ancient record that was found in their coffins this record containing som of the history of josef while in egypt and also of jacob and many prophesies delivered by them."¹⁴

Like John Whitmer, Brown does not mention Abraham, again hinting at the possibility of an early emphasis on the writings of Joseph of Egypt. This emphasis, though not to the exclusion of an emphasis on the writings of Abraham, further indicates a general awareness of the writings of Joseph of Egypt during the Kirtland era.¹⁵ Brown's is also the only known mention that the papyri contained "prophesies" by Joseph and also Jacob, his father.¹⁶

¹⁴Albert Brown, Letter to Mr. James Brown, November 1, 1835, qtd. in Christopher C. Lund, "A Letter Regarding the Acquisition of the Book of Abraham," *BYU Studies* 20, no. 4 (1980): 402–3. The holograph is in the Library of Congress.

¹⁵Interestingly, this emphasis seems to fade as the Saints move from Kirtland to Nauvoo and the Book of Abraham is published. Six of the eight known eye-witness accounts that mention the record of Joseph of Egypt come from the Kirtland era, while the last two are given when the Saints are in Nauvoo.

¹⁶Baptized in 1832, Albert Brown's account of the "prophesies" of Joseph may have been influenced by an earlier reading of the Book of Mormon, where Nephi's comments that "there are not many greater" prophecies than those uttered by Joseph of Egypt (2 Ne. 4:2). This idea however would be a stretch given the detail Albert gives of both a "history" and "prophesies" of both Joseph and his father Jacob, whereas Nephi only speaks of prophecies of Joseph.

Because Brown's account remains the only extant mention of these prophecies, it is important to examine his accuracy. In this letter, he reports reaching Kirtland on October 17, 1835.¹⁷ Joseph Smith's journal entry for Monday, October 19, 1835, states: "Exibited [sic] the records of of [sic] antiquity to a number who called to see them." Brown, newly arrived in Kirtland, may have been keenly curious about these exotic items and welcomed the opportunity to meet the Prophet as well as viewing the papyri. It seems likely that his letter home just thirteen days later would have been based on information given him by Joseph Smith personally, and I therefore assume that his information would be quite accurate.

Just one month later in December 1835, Oliver Cowdery wrote to a man by the name of William Frye of Gilead, Illinois, that was published in the *Messenger and Advocate*. This letter is probably the most comprehensive of the eyewitness accounts about the papyri collection. Like Phelps, Oliver Cowdery had spent much of the previous six months familiarizing himself with the Egyptian material. His letter is lengthy, so I am excerpting only those portions specifically relevant to the writings of Joseph of Egypt:

The language in which this record is written is very comprehensive, and many of the hieroglyphics exceedingly striking. The evidence is apparent upon the face, that they were written by persons acquainted with the history of the creation, the fall of man, and more or less of the correct ideas of notions of the Deity. The representation of the god-head—three, yet in one, is curiously drawn to give simply, though impressively, the writers views of that exalted personage. The serpent, represented as walking, or formed in a manner to be able to walk, standing in front of, and near a female figure, is to me, one of the greatest representations I have ever seen upon paper, or a writing substance; . . . Enoch's Pillar, as mentioned by Josephus, is upon the same roll. . . . The inner end of the same roll, (Joseph's record,) presents a representation of the judgment: At one view you behold the Savior seated upon his throne, crowned, and holding the scepters [sic] of righteousness and power, before whom also, are assembled the twelve tribes of Israel, the nations, languages and tongues of the earth, the kingdoms of the world over which satan is represented as reigning. Michael the archangel, holding the key of

¹⁷Lund, "A Letter Regarding the Acquisition," 402.

the bottomless pit, and at the same time the devil as being chained and shut up in the bottomless pit. . . . When the translation of these valuable documents will be completed, I am unable to say; neither can I give you a probable idea how large volumes they will make; but judging from their size, and the comprehensiveness of the language, one might reasonably expect to see a sufficient to develop much upon the mighty acts of the ancient men of God, and of his dealing with the children of men when they saw him face to face.¹⁸

This account from Oliver is by far the longest and most descriptive account of the papyri extant, particularly of the scroll he called “Joseph’s record.” Unfortunately however, it is also one of the most difficult accounts to interpret because Oliver’s description is limited to the vignettes. He makes no specific mention of Joseph of Egypt’s actual text.¹⁹ As a result, a connection between the vignettes and the writings of Joseph, while plausible, remains only as an assumption, though a strong one. If we were to assume a direct relation between the vignettes and Joseph’s writings, Cowdery’s report would indicate that Joseph of Egypt’s record recounted the Godhead, the creation,

¹⁸Oliver Cowdery, “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (December 1835): 236. Many details mentioned in the excerpt have parallels with existing Joseph Smith papyri. For example, the representation of the godhead, Enoch’s pillar, the serpent before a woman, and a judgment scene as mentioned by Oliver Cowdery can be found on Joseph Smith papyri IV, V, V, and 3A and 3B respectively.

¹⁹While modern scholars have identified the text surrounding these vignettes with the Egyptian Book of the Dead, it is important to recognize, as one non-LDS scholar has, that “In documents from the 21st Dynasty on, misalignment of the text and vignette of a spell can occur, with the text preceding the vignette, or vice versa.” Malcolm Mosher Jr., “The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead in the Late Period: A Study of Revisions Evident in Evolving Vignettes, and the Possible Chronological or Geographical Implications for Differing Versions of Vignettes” (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1989), 1:53. Another theory is that the papyri “catalyzed a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation . . . even if that revelation did not directly correlate to the characters on the papyri.” See *Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham*, Gospel Topics online, <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng> (accessed September 13, 2015).

the fall of Adam and Eve, Satan in the Garden of Eden, and other temple related themes.²⁰

Despite Oliver's failure to describe a connection between text and vignette, his account should by no means be disregarded. Cowdery occasionally served as a scribe to the Prophet Joseph during this time and had had frequent contact with the Egyptian documents throughout the previous six months. Hence, there is no grounds for assuming that Oliver's interpretations of the vignettes need be products of his own mind. To the contrary, Oliver's proximity to both the Prophet and the papyri strongly suggest that his interpretations of the vignettes were based on Joseph Smith's interpretations.

Continuing chronologically the fifth known account of the writings of Joseph appear in Stephen Post's journal on April 4, 1836. Post was baptized on July 14, 1835, and had moved to Kirtland in late November of the same year.²¹ After being ordained an Elder on Wednesday, January 27, 1836, he remained a faithful member of the Church until July 1846, when he united with the Strangite movement.²² He wrote: "Mon [April] 4 [1836]. This A.M. I saw the writings of Abraham & Joseph that came with the mummies."²³ Thus, Post confirms that writings on the papyri were attributed to Joseph of Egypt and Abraham separately by members of the Church.

Fourteen years later in 1848, William Ivins Appleby began compiling his autobiography, copying into it journal entries from the time he joined the Church in 1840. He devotes six pages to a description of the papyri, which Joseph Smith himself showed him in Nauvoo on May 5, 1841:

To day [sic] I paid Br. Joseph a visit . . . Saw the Rolls of Papyrus and the writings thereon, taken from off the bosom of the Male

²⁰Though a clear temple theme can also be found within the Book of Abraham and its associated facsimiles, there is little reason to believe Oliver's account conflates the writings of Abraham and the writings of Joseph of Egypt. While describing the vignettes, Oliver clarifies that the images were on "the same roll" twice, and then specifies in a parenthetical statement that the roll was "Joseph's record."

²¹Stephen Post, Journal, July 14, 1835, 1, Stephen Post Papers, Manuscript 1304, LDS Church History Library.

²²Max J. Evans, "Writing to Zion: The Stephen Post Collection," *BYU Studies* 14, no. 1 (1974): 100–1.

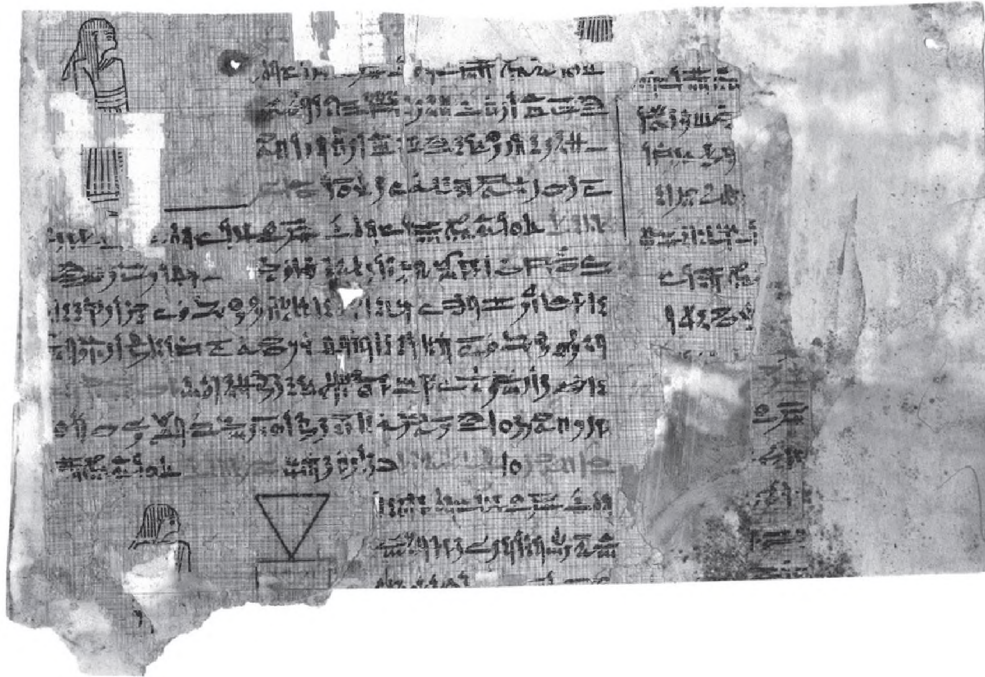
²³Stephen Post, Journal, April 4, 1836, 22, Stephen Post Papers, Manuscript 1304, LDS Church History Library.

Mummy, having some of the writings of ancient Abraham and of Joseph that was sold into Egypt. The writings are chiefly in the Egyptian language, with the exeption [sic] of a little Hebrew. I believe they give a description of some of the scenes in Ancient Egypt, of their worship, their Idol gods, etc. The writings are beautiful and plain, composed of red, and black inks. There is a perceptible difference, between the writings. Joseph, appears to have been the best scribe. There are also representations of men, beasts, Birds, Idols and oxen attached to a kind of plough, and a female guiding it. Also the serpent when he beguiled Eve. He appears with two legs, erect in the form and appearance of man. But his head in the form, and representing the Serpent, with his forked tongue extended.²⁴

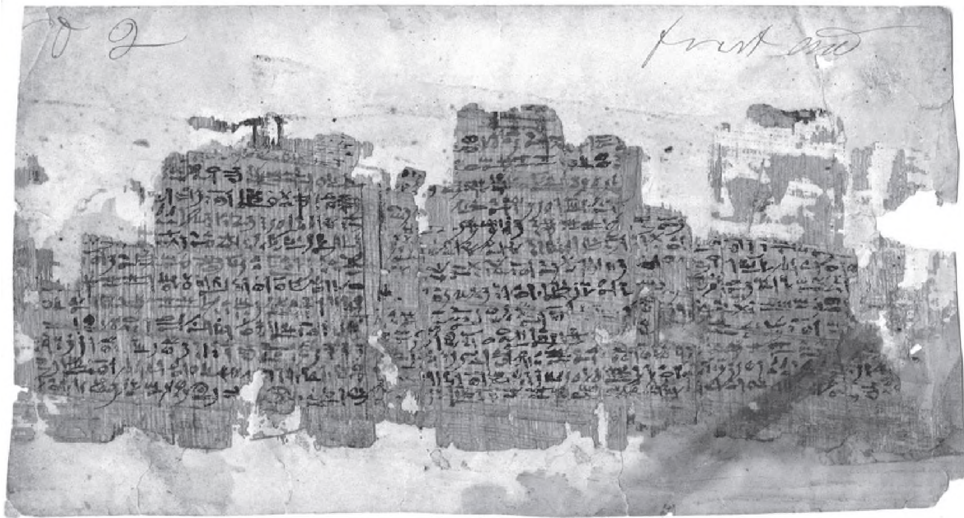
Significantly, Appleby's description of a serpent beguiling Eve corroborates Oliver Cowdery's interpretations of the vignettes. Because Joseph Smith himself showed these papyri to Appleby, it reinforces my hypothesis that both Cowdery's and Appleby's interpretations were based on Joseph Smith's own interpretation.

Appleby adds the interesting detail that Joseph of Egypt appears to have been a more skilled scribe than Abraham. The remaining papyri fragments in the Church's possession likewise show what appear to be the production of multiple scribes, including a neater script in black and red ink in recognizably horizontal rows (Joseph Smith papyri fragments IV, V, VI, VII, and VIII) and several other fragments written completely in black and less neatly with the rows crowded more closely together (Joseph Smith papyri fragments X and XI). Different handwritings should be no surprise, since the Church bought at least two (exact number unknown) scrolls from Chandler. Cowdery's description of the vignettes contained on "Joseph's record" indicates that the handwriting which Appleby attributes to Joseph appears on the surviving Joseph Smith papyri fragments II, IV, V, VI, VII, and VIII. John Gee has determined that the fragments containing portions in red ink are from the same roll of papyrus containing the Book of the Dead of Semminis. Joseph Smith papyri fragments I, X, and XI, which contain no red ink and a noticeable difference in handwriting, have been identified

²⁴William I. Appleby, *Autobiography and Journal*, May 5, 1841, 71–72, Church Historical Catalog, Manuscript 1401, fd. 1, LDS Church History Library.



Egyptian Papyrus VIII © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



Egyptian Papyrus X © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

as fragments from a different scroll belonging to a priest named Horos.²⁵

In 1842, seven years after the Church acquired the papyri, the translation of the Book of Abraham was published in three installments in the Nauvoo *Times and Seasons* paper between March 1 and May 16, 1842. Two months later, in July 1842, Joseph Smith published an editorial titled “The Government of God” in the *Times and Seasons*. Joseph Smith mentions the writings of Joseph of Egypt briefly, almost in passing, yet his comment remains a key source for understanding the writings of Joseph: “The learning of the Egyptians, and their knowledge of astronomy was no doubt taught them by Abraham and Joseph, as their records testify, who received it from the Lord.”²⁶

Though it is possible that Smith is extrapolating astronomical themes from the Book of Abraham upon the record of Joseph, evidence suggests otherwise. While the early eyewitness accounts inform us of Joseph Smith’s awareness of both records of Abraham and Joseph of Egypt, Smith refers to their records collectively, rather than individually, throughout his 1835 journal.²⁷ On January 30, 1836, after spending the previous fall translating more than a chapter in the Book of Abraham, Joseph begins to single out “the record of Abraham” for the first time in his journal entries. By the spring of 1842, Joseph’s journals no longer referred to the Book of Abraham

²⁵John Gee, “Formulas and Faith,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 1 (2012): 61, and Robert K. Ritner, “The Breathing Permit of Hor” Thirty-four Years Later,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 4 (2000): 97.

²⁶Joseph Smith, “The Government of God,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 18 (July 1842): 856; rpt., in Joseph Fielding Smith, comp. and ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 251.

²⁷Joseph Smith mentions the Egyptian records sixteen times in his personal journal between October 3, 1835 and December 23, 1835. Each of these instances refers to the records of Abraham and Joseph collectively, using terms such as “ancient records,” “the records,” “records of antiquity,” and “Egyptian records.” Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of The Joseph Smith Papers, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 57.

as part of “the Egyptian records,” but as its own distinct book.²⁸ Thus, Smith’s inclusion of Joseph of Egypt’s name alongside that of Abraham in this 1842 account comes across as deliberate, implying that he is referring to the records of Abraham and Joseph individually, rather than collectively.

Assuming no extrapolation is taking place, it can easily be said that during the seven years between acquiring the papyri and delivering the above discourse—years crowded with other events—Joseph Smith had obviously examined the writings of Joseph enough to state that (1) the Lord taught astronomy to Joseph of Egypt, and (2) he in turn taught the Egyptians. Whether Joseph’s use of the term “records” refers to actual writings or vignettes from the scroll or both is impossible to determine; but the Prophet’s account nevertheless suggests that Joseph’s record contained information about astronomy.

WHAT THESE SOURCES TELL US

Considering what has been said concerning the writings of Joseph of Egypt, we might reasonably conclude that Joseph Smith had spent some time translating, or at the very least, familiarizing himself with them. Although there is no extant manuscript for the writings of Joseph of Egypt, the eyewitness accounts offer some important details about these writings, including possibilities about content.

First, according to Joseph Smith, the writings of Joseph were on a separate scroll than the writings of Abraham. Joseph Smith also expected to translate and publish the writings of Joseph of Egypt, an expectation reinforced by John Whitmer, W. W. Phelps, and Oliver Cowdery. Furthermore, the writings of Joseph of Egypt were a substantial body. Indeed, John Whitmer says that there was “much” written by Joseph of Egypt on the papyri.

²⁸The first instance in which Joseph singles out the “record of Abraham” in his journals is in his entry on January 30, 1836. He refers to the “records of Abraham” again four days later on February 3, 1836, and “Abrahams writings” on May 6, 1836. He again specifies Abraham’s record six times between February 23–March 9, 1842 as he worked on preparing the record for its publication in the *Times and Seasons*. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, vol. 2 of the Journals series of The Joseph Smith Papers, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 36–42.

With regard to the actual content, Joseph Smith comments that the writings of Joseph of Egypt were voluminous enough to contain an account of “the learning of the Egyptians” and a “knowledge of astronomy” that Joseph had received from the Lord before teaching it to the Egyptians. Albert Brown added that the writings of Joseph contained not only Joseph’s prophecies but prophecies by his father, Jacob. John Whitmer indicates that the writings of Joseph contained a history, while Albert Brown clarifies that it specifically contained a history of Joseph while in Egypt.

Although in the absence of the manuscript it may be argued that nothing concerning Joseph of Egypt’s lost writings can be claimed with 100 percent certainty, it seems clearly corroborated that the papyri contained a distinct, historical account written by Joseph of Egypt and that the Prophet Joseph intended to publish a translation. Whether or not this translation was finished, however, is unknown. The questions these sources may answer, however, are small compared to the questions they create. Joseph Smith asserted that Joseph of Egypt understood “the knowledge of the Egyptians” and taught them “astronomy.” However, the meaning of “knowledge of the Egyptians” is illusive; and although Joseph of Egypt’s teaching astronomy to the Egyptians may be related to the story of Abraham doing the same thing, a narrative of their doing so is still lacking.²⁹

These types of unanswered questions linger. Bruce R. McConkie has stated that “the day shall come when the Book of Joseph shall be restored and its contents shall be known again.”³⁰ Until that day, accounts may yet be discovered in journals, letters, or other documents that could shed further light on this fascinating record of Joseph of Egypt.

²⁹According to Abraham 3, the Lord taught Abraham astronomy, and the Prophet Joseph Smith also characterizes the Lord as the source of Joseph of Egypt’s astronomical knowledge. Facsimile No. 3 is an illustration of this missing account from the Book of Abraham. The fact that there was more to the Book of Abraham than that which is currently published in the canonized Pearl of Great Price is documented in John Taylor, “Notice,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 6 (February 1843): 95: “We had the promise of Br. Joseph, to furnish us with further extracts from the Book of Abraham.” See also Duane D. Call, “Anson Call and His Contributions toward Latter-day Saint Colonization” (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1956), 32–33.

³⁰Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 97.