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Theories to Explain the Book of Abraham

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Joseph Smith Papyrus III (in current condition). The vignette accompanied Book of the Dead 125 in Ptolemaic times (332–30 B.C.). The papyrus originally belonged to a woman named Noufianoub.



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Theories to Explain the Book of Abraham

Because we do not have all the papyri that Joseph Smith had, and because those that have been preserved do not contain a copy of the text of the Book of Abraham, there is no simple answer to the question, “Did Joseph Smith translate the Book of Abraham correctly?” Instead, answers are given based on various theories about issues such as (1) the relationship of the Book of Abraham text to the papyri, (2) the date of the Book of Abraham text, (3) the date of the papyri, (4) the transmission of the text, and (5) the nature of the facsimiles. In certain incomplete presentations, many of the conclusions based on the theories may seem valid at first glance. A more careful study of theories concerning the Book of Abraham translation, however, reveals that the theories are often assumed rather than examined or





even stated, and thus the conclusions based on them, while sometimes appearing plausible, may be suspect. Below we examine the main theories since there is no single Latter-day Saint or non-Latter-day Saint position on these issues.

Theories about the Book of Abraham				
Relation of Book of Abraham to Papyri	Date of Book of Abraham	Date of Papyri	Transmission of Text	Nature of Facsimiles
Kirtland Egyptian Papers Theory	Abrahamic	Abraham's Day	Manuscript written by Abraham	Egyptian funerary texts
Missing Papyrus Theory	Hellenistic	Ptolemaic Period	Abraham wrote text in Egypt and it stayed there	Illustrations of the day
Pure Revelation Theory	Modern	Roman Period	Abraham's descendants brought text to Egypt	Copied from Abraham's drawings
			Mnemonic device used to link two texts	Drawn by Abraham





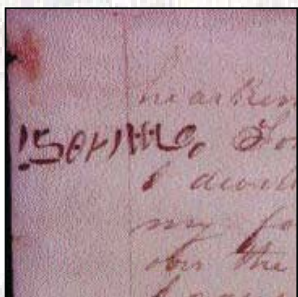
Relationship of the Book of Abraham Text to the Papyri

Several theories posit ways in which the Book of Abraham text relates to the papyri. These may be categorized as the Kirtland Egyptian Papers theory, the missing papyrus theory, and the pure revelation theory.

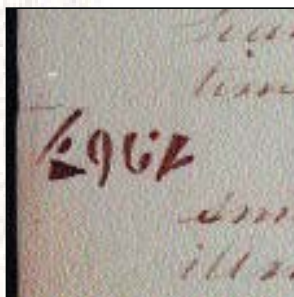
Some people, both Mormon and non-Mormon, believe that Joseph Smith used the Kirtland Egyptian Papers (sometimes mistakenly called the Alphabet and Grammar^{*}) to produce the Book of Abraham from the papyri. The Kirtland Egyptian Papers were a group of miscellaneous documents primarily in the handwriting of several men who served at various times as Joseph Smith's scribes, and these documents were produced in Kirtland or Nauvoo. Three of the documents from the Kirtland Egyptian Papers contain a partial copy of the translated Book of Abraham in which a word or two in Egyptian characters is written in the left-hand margin at the beginning of each paragraph of English text. According to this theory, the text to the right is the translation of the Egyptian characters to the left. Unfortunately for this theory, the Egyptian characters were added after the entire English text was written (as evidenced by the use of different inks, Egyptian characters that do not always line up with the English text, and Egyptian characters that sometimes overrun the English text). Thus it was not a matter of writing the character and then writing the translation but of someone later adding the characters in the margin at the beginning of paragraphs of text without explicitly stating the reason for doing so.

^{*}There is no document called the "Alphabet and Grammar." Those who use this term use it either to refer to the Kirtland Egyptian Papers or to a specific document among them titled "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language."

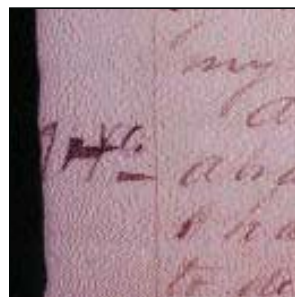




(1) KEPA 1, page 8.



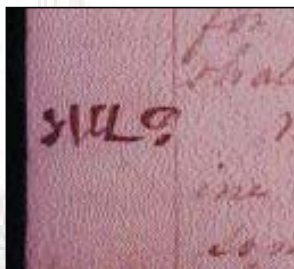
(2) KEPA 3, page 5.



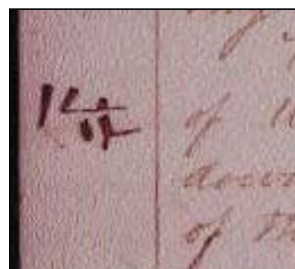
(3) KEPA 1, page 3.



(4) KEPA 2, page 2.



(5) KEPA 1, page 6.



(6) KEPA 1, page 4.

Examples of Egyptian characters written in the margins of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers Book of Abraham manuscripts (KEPA). The examples show that the characters (1) were written in different ink than the English text (examples 2, 3, 4, 6), (2) do not line up with the English text (examples 3, 4, 6), and (3) run over the margins (examples 1, 2, 5) and sometimes the English text (example 1). 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.

Advocates of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers theory also assume that Joseph Smith first compiled a grammar from which he then produced the translation. But when a text in an unknown language is initially translated, a decipherer usually cracks the language without the use of grammars. Gram-marians then go through the translation, establish the gram-matical usage, and compile a grammar. Later, individuals learn the grammar and then produce translations. As a decipherer and one who had never formally studied any grammar at the time he produced the translation, Joseph Smith would have done the translation first.





The Kirtland Egyptian Papers that have been connected with the papyri appear to be a later attempt to match up the translation of the Book of Abraham with some of the Egyptian characters (see examples on opposite page). If one assumes that the Book of Abraham was the second text on the papyrus of Hor, a possible scenario is that having the translation of the Book of Abraham, the brethren at Kirtland tried to match the Egyptian characters with the translation but chose the characters from the first text. Yet it is not certain that this is what they thought they were doing.

Some have reasoned that since the preserved papyri account for no more than 13 percent of all the papyri that Joseph Smith possessed, the Book of Abraham does not match the translation of the preserved papyri because it was most likely translated from a portion of the papyri that is now missing. Any theory such as this one that has Joseph Smith translating an authentic ancient text assumes that he did so by divine inspiration.

Others have thought that the Book of Abraham was not connected in any way with the papyri but was received by pure inspiration. Mormons and non-Mormons who hold this theory differ as to the source of that inspiration.

Date of the Text of the Book of Abraham

The date of a text is the date when the text was written by its author. A text can be copied into various manuscripts or translated into other languages, and these manuscripts or translations will have different, later dates than the date of the original text. When we refer to the date of the text, we refer to the date of the original text. For example, the text of the Gospel of Matthew was written in the first century A.D., but the





Egyptian Chronology

4500–3150 B.C.	Predynastic Period
3150–2700 B.C.	Early Dynastic Period
2700–2190 B.C.	Old Kingdom
2200–2040 B.C.	First Intermediate Period
2046–1794 B.C.	Middle Kingdom
1795–1553 B.C.	Second Intermediate Period
1552–1069 B.C.	New Kingdom
1295–1069 B.C.	Ramesside Period
1069–702 B.C.	Third Intermediate Period
1069–715 B.C.	Lybian Period
747–656 B.C.	Kushite Period
672–525 B.C.	Saite Period
525–359 B.C.	First Persian Period
404–343 B.C.	Dynasties 27–30
343–332 B.C.	Second Persian Period
332–30 B.C.	Ptolemaic Period
30 B.C.–A.D. 395	Roman Period
A.D. 396–642	Byzantine Period

earliest manuscript that we have of Matthew was copied in the third century. Theories about the date that the text of the Book of Abraham was written—whether Abrahamic, Greco-Roman, or modern—have characterized the major division between Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint approaches to the Book of Abraham. The text of the Book of Abraham is usually dated (to modern or ancient times) by assumption rather than by any attempt to demonstrate the milieu out of which it came.

Most non-Latter-day Saints think that the Book of Abraham





is a modern fabrication by Joseph Smith. A handful of Latter-day Saints think that the Book of Abraham was written by an unknown individual in Greco-Roman Egypt (fourth century B.C. through the fifth century A.D.) and that it is an ancient pseudepigraphon translated by Joseph Smith. Most Latter-day Saints believe the text to be written by the patriarch Abraham.

Date of the Papyri

The date of the Joseph Smith Papyri is a separate issue from the date of the text of the Book of Abraham and remains an issue regardless of whether or not the papyri are viewed as the source of the Book of Abraham. The three time periods proposed are Abraham's day, the Ptolemaic period, and the Roman period.

Some have assumed that the papyri date to Abraham's day. This notion is supported by hearsay sources (notably Josiah Quincy) who misunderstood what Joseph Smith said.¹² Those who assume that the papyri date to Abraham's day often do not distinguish between the date of a text and the date of a manuscript, which is a copy of that text. (For example, Paul's letter to the Galatians was written in the first century, but most of the manuscripts date to much later.) This theory is largely a straw man since it is mostly anti-Mormons who claim that Mormons believe that the papyri, rather than the text, date to Abraham's time.

For many years the standard date for the Joseph Smith Papyri was the Roman period, either in the first century B.C. or in the first century A.D. (or more precisely, the second half of the first century A.D.). This was argued on the basis of the hieratic handwriting (a cursive form of ancient Egyptian) on the papyri, sometimes additionally shored up by connecting the





Greco-Roman Egyptian Chronology

- 332 B.C. Alexander the Great conquers Egypt
- 305 B.C. Ptolemy I (Soter) becomes Pharaoh
- 282 B.C. Ptolemy II Philadelphos becomes Pharaoh
- 247 B.C. Ptolemy III Euergetes becomes Pharaoh
- 222 B.C. Ptolemy IV Philopator becomes Pharaoh
- 205 B.C. Thebes revolts under Haronnophris
Ptolemy V Epiphanes becomes Pharaoh
- 199 B.C. Chaonnophris succeeds Haronnophris
- 197 B.C. Rosetta Stone Decree issued
- 187 B.C. Ptolemy V finally defeats Chaonnophris
- 181 B.C. Ptolemy VI Philometer becomes Pharaoh
- c. 181–170 B.C. Jewish temple erected in Leontopolis
- 170 B.C. Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II begins rule as coregent
- 146 B.C. Ptolemy VIII assumes sole rule
- 132–131 B.C. Thebes revolts under Hariese
- 117 B.C. Ptolemy IX Soter II becomes Pharaoh
- 81 B.C. Ptolemy XII Auletes becomes Pharaoh
- 52 B.C. Cleopatra VII Philopator becomes ruler of Egypt
- 30 B.C. Caesar Augustus becomes ruler of Egypt
- A.D. 14 Tiberius rules Egypt
- A.D. 40 Claudius rules Egypt
- A.D. 54 Nero rules Egypt
- A.D. 63 Demotic Book of the Dead
- A.D. 68 Vespasian rules Egypt
- A.D. 71 Jewish Temple at Leontopolis closes
- A.D. 78 Titus rules Egypt
- A.D. 81 Domitian rules Egypt
- A.D. 97 Trajan rules Egypt
- A.D. 107 Soter archon in Thebes





papyri with the Soter find,* an early second-century A.D. cache also excavated by Antonio Lebolo.

More recently, Egyptologists have dated the Joseph Smith Papyri to the Ptolemaic period, more specifically to the first half of the second century B.C. or late third century B.C. They support their arguments by identifying those who originally owned the papyri as the same individuals mentioned in dated sources by means of their priestly titles and family associations. Those who have argued for this date have pointed out that hieratic handwriting is an unreliable criterion for the Ptolemaic and Roman periods and that none of the individuals in the Soter find are related to anyone mentioned in the Joseph Smith Papyri.

Transmission of the Text

Those who believe that the original text of the Book of Abraham dates back to Abraham himself can also be further distinguished by four different theories of textual transmission. (Textual transmission is the means by which the text was passed down, or transmitted, through time.)

Those who believe that the manuscript (and not just the text) of the Book of Abraham dates back to Abraham's day think the papyri were written by Abraham while he was in Egypt; thus textual transmission does not occur in this theory. Although anti-Mormons often attribute this belief to Latter-day Saints, there is nothing in the teachings of the church that compels this conclusion nor is it a universally held belief among Latter-day Saints.

A second theory holds that Abraham wrote the text of the

*Soter was the governor of Thebes in A.D. 107.





Book of Abraham as an Egyptian text while he was in Egypt, that the text was then transmitted by Egyptians, and that the papyri are a later manuscript. Proponents of this view do not take into account why, if it were intended for Egyptians, there are explanations of Egyptian customs and beliefs in the text. The Book of Abraham seems to be directed toward an audience unfamiliar with Egyptian customs (see, for example, Abraham 1:21–27).

A third theory of transmission postulates that the Book of Abraham was written by Abraham and passed down through his descendants (the Jews), some of whom took a copy to Egypt where it was copied (after being translated) onto a later manuscript.

Another more complicated theory of textual transmission is called the mnemonic device theory. Supporters of this theory hypothesize that the Egyptian characters could serve as a sort of mnemonic device for ancient scribes to recall the Book of Abraham as well as to convey the Egyptian text. This way someone who already knew the text of the Book of Abraham could have it brought to mind by reading a seemingly unrelated text, the Book of Breathings Made by Isis. This theory has been widely misunderstood and misinterpreted as a theory dealing with the relationship of the papyri to the Book of Abraham. The authors of this theory, however, do not argue that Joseph Smith used this correlation to produce the Book of Abraham, but that someone in ancient times used this as a means to recall a memorized text.

Nature of the Facsimiles

The Book of Abraham is unique in Latter-day Saint scripture because ancient illustrations accompany the text. Perhaps no aspect of the Book of Abraham has provoked more contro-





versy or comment than its facsimiles. There have been several attempts to explain the facsimiles and their relationship to the Book of Abraham.

The major non-Mormon theory is that the facsimiles belong to Egyptian funerary texts and have nothing whatsoever to do with Abraham. Proponents of this theory support it using one of four major arguments: (1) Because Facsimiles 1 and 3 of the Book of Abraham were on the same roll as the so-called Book of Breathings Made by Isis, these facsimiles must derive from the Book of Breathings Made by Isis; (2) the facsimiles are typical vignettes from the Book of the Dead; (3) the elements in the facsimiles are common elements found in vignettes from the Book of the Dead; or (4) the facsimiles are common funerary vignettes. These arguments are not necessarily compatible.

There are problems with each of these arguments: (1) Arguing that Facsimiles 1 and 3 are part of the so-called Book of Breathings Made by Isis fails to explain why no other copy of this book has vignettes similar to the facsimiles. (2) Those who argue that the facsimiles are typical vignettes from the Book of the Dead fail to produce parallel vignettes from said book, which is strange if they occur so often. Supposedly parallel vignettes usually lack significant elements found in the facsimiles or contain significant elements that the facsimiles lack. (3) Those who argue that elements in the facsimiles are commonly found in vignettes from the Book of the Dead often fail to provide specific examples from the Book of the Dead. For example, while canopic jars are occasionally depicted on copies of the Book of the Dead, they are not common. (4) Although widening the scope to include any funerary vignettes results in parallels to Facsimile 2, it has so far not produced parallels to





Facsimiles 1 or 3. Most of the known parallels to Facsimile 1 are from temple contexts, not funerary contexts, and those who point to these parallels fail to pay attention both to important differences between the parallels and Facsimile 1 or to the context of the supposed parallels. Most of the collections of parallels to Facsimile 2 are incomplete, and those who point to these parallels usually ignore the identifications of the individual figures in the Egyptian inscriptions.

The second theory is that the facsimiles originated with Abraham and were drawn by him on the papyrus. This approach assumes that the papyri date to Abraham's day. Problems exist with this theory as well: if the papyri date to later than Abraham, the artwork cannot have been Abraham's. In support of a later date, the artwork of the facsimiles is not in the style of Abraham's day.

A third theory is that the facsimiles originated with Abraham and were copied along with the manuscript. (We should not assume that the ancient scribes even attempted to copy the facsimiles with photographic accuracy.) This theory has the advantage of being able to explain the style of the vignettes but has the disadvantage of largely being neither provable nor disprovable.

A fourth theory is that the facsimiles are illustrations only loosely dependent on the text. They are illustrations of the time period in which the papyri were produced, using stock motifs of the art of that time and place. The facsimiles thus are comparable to medieval manuscript illuminations. This theory has the advantage of matching the way Egyptian vignettes were produced.



