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A WELCOME RESPONSE, BUT FLAWS REMAIN

Jeff Lindsay

Abstract: *After Interpreter published my lengthy paper that discussed apparent bias and flaws in scholarship in the Joseph Smith Papers volume on the Book of Abraham, two members of the JSP Project team have responded with a defense of their volume. Their reply is welcome and points to some of the strengths in the methodology behind much of the volume. However, the specific evidence for bias and flawed scholarship seems to stand and merits further attention.*

After feeling compelled to point out some painful gaps and apparent bias in what is nonetheless a remarkably valuable resource on the Book of Abraham from the Joseph Smith Papers Project,¹ I was happy to see a response from some of the people involved with publication of Volume 4 of *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations* (hereafter JSPRT4).² Criticizing any aspect of such an important and beautiful volume published by the Church that I love is not something I did with any pleasure, but I felt that readers of the volume and those who follow the public lectures or podcasts of the editors must be aware of the problems I noticed.

I am grateful for the thoughtful response from Matt Grow and Matthew C. Godfrey, two of the series editors for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. I can imagine that it must be frustrating and perhaps even offensive for such an important work to have received criticism

1. See Jeffrey Dean Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019), 13–104, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-precious-resource-with-some-gaps/>.

2. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, eds. Scott Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018).

from a fellow member of the Church who cannot be aware firsthand of just how much care went into that project.

Considering Bias and Unintended Consequences

Grow and Godfrey state that I misunderstand “the scope and purpose of the Joseph Smith Papers, which is to provide reputable and accurate transcriptions of Joseph Smith’s papers with contextual annotation for both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint scholars” and not to provide “first aid” for apparent problems associated with the Book of Abraham.

I appreciate their reiteration of the reasonable policies and goals of the Joseph Smith Papers and the assurance that many people were involved in carefully reviewing many aspects of the work to give us this remarkable production with detailed photographs and extensive transcripts. I appreciate their assurance that policies and procedures were followed.

My question remains, though: Is there evidence of potentially harmful bias, or does the volume simply “provide reputable and accurate transcriptions of Joseph Smith’s papers” with unbiased “contextual annotation”? Based on the after-publication public statements of the volume editors — statements not publicly challenged, countered, or disavowed by either Grow or Godfrey — we can gain insight into the volume editors’ personal views and can see extensive evidence that these views appear to have influenced many choices and judgments made in JSPRT4. The specifics of these choices and judgments raised in the reviews of this volume³ are not addressed in the series editors’ reply and cannot be resolved simply through a recounting of the editorial and production processes of JSPRT4.

I was both surprised and disappointed that the volume editors of JSPRT4 were not included as co-authors in the reply to our reviews, as some of the perspectives they have published elsewhere seem to exude a different spirit from the calm, conciliatory, and welcome views expressed by Grow and Godfrey. Brian Hauglid, for example, has stated that he finds the “apologetic” views of two BYU Egyptologists to be “abhorrent.”⁴ He further expresses his firm conclusion “that the [Kirtland] Egyptian papers

3. Besides my review, see also John Gee, “The Joseph Smith Papers Project Stumbles,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019), 175–86, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-joseph-smith-papers-project-stumbles/>.

4. Brian Hauglid, November 9, 2018, comment on Dan Vogel, “Truth of the Book of Abraham (Part 6) — Joseph Smith As a Student of Hebrew,” Facebook, November 9, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/dan.vogel.35/posts/1398006876998582>.

were used to produce the BoA.”⁵ He has changed his mind from his earlier public statements on the origins of the Book of Abraham and says that as a result, the JSPRT4 volume he co-edited is “much more open” to the views of a leading critic of the Book of Abraham.⁶

Grow and Godfrey’s response is that “the question of how and when Joseph translated the Book of Abraham is a complex one — but it is not the question that this volume strives to answer.” However, in several places JSPRT4 belies this statement of neutrality. For example, John Gee mentions in his review this bold statement in the volume’s commentary: “No evidence indicates that JS studied any of the hieroglyphs from the hypocephalus in his 1835 effort to understand the Egyptian language. However, the explanation of Facsimile 2 is clearly related to that effort, since some of the entries in this document borrow heavily from the Grammar and Alphabet volume.”⁷ This is one of numerous statements where *a controversial position is taken without alerting the reader that a controversy exists*. What evidence is there to support the editors’ personal opinion here rather than the overlooked and arguably more plausible alternative that related entries in the GAEL were derived from Joseph’s existing comments on Facsimile 2? The volume editors’ statement suggesting the translation of Facsimile 2 derives or borrows from the GAEL is a questionable assumption made even more explicit in subsequent public comments by Hauglid. Can we really accept that this volume is free of bias and even mischief, however unintended?

My review points out several other examples of such bias that merit a more complete response, including the statement suggesting there is “some evidence” that Abraham 1:1-3 was derived from the GAEL, based solely on a critic’s publication which asserts derivation because those verses strike him as choppy.⁸ Of particular importance is the claim that the “twin” Book of Abraham manuscripts represent live dictation directly from Joseph Smith of either live original translation or newly edited translation of the Book of Abraham, thus ignoring significant textual evidence that this was not a case of Joseph’s dictating new scripture but represented work with an existing manuscript.⁹

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Gee, “The Joseph Smith Papers Project Stumbles,” 181, citing Jensen and Hauglid, *Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, 276.

8. See Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” beginning at p. 72.

9. Ibid., 61–76.

Astonishingly, the overlooked evidence includes the reasonably supported position given in an earlier JSP volume which explains why it is clear that an existing manuscript was being used by the scribes writing the “twin” manuscripts rather than taking direct translation from Joseph. It also overlooks significant additional evidence from the text which I illustrate in detail in my review but which is not mentioned by Grow and Godfrey. The position taken by the volume editors, apparently reflecting personal bias rather than scholarly consensus, gives credence to the assertion of critics that these manuscripts represent a “window” into how Joseph translated (that is, turning one character into large chunks of English), which was also the theme of the volume editors’ January 2019 seminar at BYU, which profoundly disturbed some members of the Church.¹⁰

Assurances about policies and procedures do not address the many issues around the subtle but serious mishandling of the “twin” manuscripts, including the volume editors’ failure to consider the reasonable views of other scholars (including their own JSP peers) and the failure to account for textual evidence discussed in my review and the very heading or title given at the top of the twin manuscripts. This suggests that their intent is to support further entries for a section in the GAEL, as discussed in my article for *Meridian Magazine*,¹¹ which underscores the role of Joseph’s translation as a *source* for the GAEL and not the other way around. But all such evidence is brushed aside with assertions that, as Hauglid stated after publication, are surprisingly “open” to the views of a leading critic of the Book of Abraham.¹² Such errors can occur unintentionally and in good faith, but they do not align with the high ideals of the Joseph Smith Papers Project as very ably expressed in the Grow and Godfrey response. If they are not errors, and my analysis is unfounded, I welcome a more detailed response explaining why. This is one case in which I would sincerely like to be wrong in my misgivings.

10. Brian Hauglid and Robin Jensen, “A Window into Joseph Smith’s Translation” (Neal A. Maxwell Institute seminar, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, Jan. 11, 2019), <https://mi.byu.edu/news-events/01-11-jensen-hauglid/>.

11. Jeff Lindsay, “Dealing with ‘Friendly Fire’ on the Book of Abraham,” *Meridian Magazine* (August 25, 2019), <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/dealing-with-friendly-fire-on-the-book-of-abraham/>; and Jeff Lindsay, “The Meaning of the Twin Book of Abraham Manuscripts,” *Meridian Magazine* (August 26, 2019), <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/the-meaning-of-the-twin-book-of-abraham-manuscripts/>.

12. Hauglid, November 9, 2018, comment on Dan Vogel’s Facebook page, discussed in Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” 19–21.

Other issues I feel Grow and Godfrey have not addressed include:

- An easily demonstrated error in the historical treatment of “Egyptomania without Champollion,” which helps support the critic’s framework that Joseph and the Saints were ignorant of the nature of Egyptian revealed from the Rosetta Stone and the work of Champollion.¹³
- Failure to consider Joseph’s own statements and the Book of Mormon’s teachings on the nature of the “reformed” Egyptian language that undermine assertions from critics on how Joseph thought one character of Egyptian could explode into hundreds of words of English when translated.¹⁴
- Errors in dating of documents that tend to favor positions taken by some critics while overlooking recent scholarship from Latter-day Saint authors that gives other date ranges. Statements on what was translated in 1842 vs. 1835 also display a similar lack of balance.¹⁵

In all this, I do not intend to call into question the faithfulness of the volume editors, but all involved with the Joseph Smith Papers Project should understand the unavoidable consequences of the publicly stated positions of the volume editors and the impact of the numerous positions taken in JSPRT4 that seem to align improperly with views of some critics while undermining reasonable positions that can be and have been taken by other scholars.

Lauding the process of transcription and production is one thing, but catching unstated assumptions and unquestioned biases can be painfully difficult. For example, I would not expect the many reviewers who assisted with the preparation of JSPRT4 to recognize the errors and potential harm from the hidden assumptions and biases in the way the “twin” Book of Abraham manuscripts are presented unless they were dealing with the details of some current arguments from critics of the Book of Abraham. These are unnecessary gaps in scholarship that can also incidentally and unintentionally lead to gaps in testimonies of those struggling with Book of Abraham issues.

I believe my review demonstrates with abundant examples that the commentary, footnotes, omissions, and many other editorial choices nudge the reader toward specific views while undermining the views of others in ways that don’t reflect objectivity. I would urge any readers

13. Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” 76–86.

14. *Ibid.*, 79–80.

15. *Ibid.*, 35, 58–61, 69–70.

to evaluate the examples I provide and make up their own minds as to whether they exhibit the objectivity that Grow and Godfrey rightly indicate is the ideal.

Historiography and the Missing Hugh Nibley

One fact I mentioned in my review as a potential indicator of possible bias was the complete absence of any reference to Hugh Nibley and his extensive writings concerning the Book of Abraham, the Joseph Smith papyri, and the Kirtland Egyptian Papers.¹⁶ Grow and Godfrey assert that in noting this I am asking “the Joseph Smith Papers to engage in historiography, or reciting and evaluating the history of scholarship on a given topic.” They correctly state that it is “the long-established policy of the Joseph Smith Papers Project to refrain from historiographical discussions.”

After reading Grow and Godfrey’s response, I fear that perhaps my concern regarding Nibley was not stated clearly enough, for which I apologize. I am certainly not asking for historiography per se, or a study of the history of who said what. I am asking for appropriate scholarship in commenting on what is discussed in JSPRT4. The volume makes numerous interpretive comments that guide the reader in understanding key issues related to the nature of the documents it covers. The editors discuss issues such as the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, the nature of Joseph’s translation, Joseph’s understanding of the nature of the language he was looking at, the nature of the Egyptian documents, the meaning of the Egyptian characters and figures, the dating of the documents, the manner in which Joseph translated, and what was translated when, etc. As Grow and Godfrey recognize, a variety of viewpoints exist on all these issues and others. Fortunately, important scholarship has been carried out by scholars like Hugh Nibley and others, though in my opinion none are so prolific, wide-ranging, and influential as Nibley’s. Readers of JSPRT4 wouldn’t know that, however, because the works of Nibley are not referenced once in over a thousand citations.

For example, in terms of translating the Egyptian characters to understand their meaning, to my knowledge three key scholars have historically contributed extensive translation: Michael Rhodes, Robert K. Ritner (a scholar openly skeptical of Joseph Smith’s translations), and Hugh Nibley. Of these three, the one most extensively cited in JSPRT4 is Ritner, with citations of Rhodes coming in a distant second. Nibley, as I noted, is never cited — not even once.

16. Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” 21–24.

The neglect of Nibley is clearly an editorial choice I cannot fathom as being simply a matter of policy regarding historiography. Is it possible that an unstated and unrecognized bias against apologetics resulted in a failure to consider referencing Nibley's analysis of the papyri and their place in Egyptian history, Nibley's analysis of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers or any of the many volumes of scholarship on the Book of Abraham that Nibley produced?

Conclusion

JSPRT4 is a precious resource, and I am grateful for the vision of the Joseph Smith Papers Project team and the Church for making it available. However, the painful possibility of improper bias aligned with some common but debatable views of our critics needs to be recognized by those who use the volume, lest those views be assumed to be the consensus of sound scholarship and the implicit position of the Church. Such bias needs to be recognized by those who encounter past presentations by or interviews of the editors as they discuss the origins and purported warts of the Book of Abraham.

The messaging resulting from this volume and subsequent public statements by the volume editors has done damage to the testimonies of some vulnerable members of the Church. A more balanced approach would overtly leave the door open to other views, which arguably have a stronger evidentiary basis than some of the questionable positions taken by the editors of JSPRT4. Again, my concerns are not about historiography or even apologetics but about sound and even-handed scholarship. That's the most painful gap my review seeks to address. It is also the gap not directly addressed by Grow and Godfrey.

Again I am thankful for the response provided by Grow and Godfrey and congratulate all members of the Joseph Smith Papers Project on the string of breakthroughs their project has brought in many related areas. I hope my warnings regarding this unusual volume, as painful as they may be, will not dampen the appreciation of many of us for what the Joseph Smith Papers Project has achieved.

*Jeffrey Dean Lindsay and his wife, Kendra, are residents of Shanghai, China. Jeff has been providing online materials defending the Latter-day Saint faith for over twenty years, primarily at JeffLindsay.com. His *Mormanity* blog (<http://mormanity.blogspot.com>) has been in operation since 2004. He also wrote weekly for Orson Scott Card's Nauvoo Times*

(NauvooTimes.com) from 2012 through 2016 and is currently on the Board of Advisors for The Interpreter Foundation. Jeff has a PhD in chemical engineering from BYU and is a registered US patent agent. For the past eight years he was the Head of Intellectual Property for Asia Pulp and Paper, but has just started a new role as Head of R&D and IP for Lume Deodorant. Formerly, he was associate professor at the Institute of Paper Science and Technology (now the Renewable Bioproducts Institute) at Georgia Tech, then went into R&D at Kimberly-Clark Corporation, eventually becoming corporate patent strategist and senior research fellow. He then spent several years at Innovationedge in Neenah, Wisconsin, helping many companies with innovation and IP strategy. Since 2015, Jeff has been recognized as a leading IP strategist by Intellectual Asset Magazine in their global IAM300 listing based on peer input. He is also lead author of Conquering Innovation Fatigue (John Wiley & Sons, 2009). He is active in the chemical engineering community and was recently named a Fellow of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers. Jeff served a mission in the German-speaking Switzerland Zurich Mission and currently serves as counselor in the district presidency of the Shanghai International District. He and his wife Kendra are the parents of four boys and have ten grandchildren.