



Type: Journal Article

“We May Not Understand Our Words”: The Book of Abraham and the Concept of Translation in The Pearl of Greatest Price

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Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,
Volume 41 (2020), pp. 1-48

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

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INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 41 · 2020 · Pages 1 - 48

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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**“WE MAY NOT UNDERSTAND OUR WORDS”:
THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM AND
THE CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION IN
*THE PEARL OF GREATEST PRICE***

John S. Thompson

Review of Terryl Givens with Brian Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). 285 pages. \$34.95 (hardback).

Abstract: *In recent years there has been an effort among some scholars to make sense of the historical sources surrounding Joseph Smith’s claims to be a translator of ancient records. Terryl Givens, with some assistance from Brian Hauglid, has explored the evidence surrounding the Book of Abraham and suggests that, in this case, Joseph Smith may not have translated an ancient record of Abraham’s writings into English as typically believed in the Latter-day Saint community. Consequently, Givens provides four alternative ways the work of “translating” may have been understood or practiced by the Prophet and his scribes. This essay highlights some evidence that was overlooked, misunderstood, and glossed by Givens, calling into question his fourfold attempt at redefining what it meant for Joseph Smith to translate this ancient record.*

Somewhat perplexing about Jared’s remark to his brother in the Book of Mormon’s account of the Tower of Babel is his reasoning that if their language is confounded, they might not understand their own words: “Cry unto the Lord, that he will not confound us that we may not understand *our* words” (Ether 1:34). Traditional interpretation of the Tower of Babel story posits that the confounding of languages was a sudden multiplying of spoken dialects, making it difficult for one person or group

to understand the words of another. Jared’s concern that they might not understand their own words, however, suggests something deeper.

Perhaps this story, as others have suggested, is less about a miles-high building and the sudden onset of the world’s spoken dialects and more about a ritual ascent to “heaven” via a false temple and the confounding of God’s word through subtle changes to its terminology and meaning based on the reasonings of mortals.¹ Small changes may seem innocuous at first but might lay the foundations for rifts, divisions, and the fragmenting of religious “languages” over time. Joseph Smith lamented about this kind a confounding when he said “the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passage of Scripture so differently as <to> destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.”² In such multiplicity of religious languages, people may use words such as “baptism” or “priesthood” or “God” in their rhetoric, but they may not understand their unadulterated meaning.

In recent years, there has been an effort among some scholars to make sense of the historical sources surrounding Joseph Smith’s claims to be a “translator.”³ Some of the evidence they highlight appears to call into question the typical understanding of that title in the Latter-day Saint community — an understanding based on 1) the Prophet’s own claims that he was revealing in English some texts that were originally written in ancient languages, such as the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, and some lost biblical narratives, and 2) the community’s scriptural declaration that seers, like Joseph Smith, can “translate all records that are of ancient date; ... a seer can know of things which are past” (Mosiah 8:13, 17). These claims are understood to be miraculous and are generally accepted by faith in the Latter-day Saint community.

Recently, the popular and gifted writer Terryl Givens (with some assistance from Brian Hauglid) addressed some of the controversy surrounding Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Abraham in his

1. E.g., see Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 5* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 172-73.

2. Joseph Smith, “History, 1838-1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805-30 August 1834],” p. 2-3, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/2>.

3. For the most recent collection of articles dealing with this issue, see *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, eds. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020).

commentary on the Pearl of Great Price, a Latter-day Saint scriptural collection containing, in part, a few of Joseph Smith's revealed translations.⁴ As is typical of Givens' works generally, the book makes accessible some of Joseph Smith's cultural and theological contexts and provides balanced textual and reception histories of the Pearl of Great Price's various components. His writing style is approachable and engaging and gives readers much to ponder.

In his chapter on the Book of Abraham, Givens briefly explores 1) Joseph Smith's title as "seer," including the role that the Urim and Thummim and translation play in defining that title; 2) an assumption that Joseph Smith believed the original ancient Adamic language, being pure, provided one the ability to fully access and express God's word unhampered, and that recovering this concrete dialect was ultimately a part of the Restoration in its fullest sense; 3) Joseph Smith's personal connection to, and the broader antebellum American fascination with, all things Egyptian and the events leading up to Joseph Smith's acquisition of mummies and papyri; 4) the relationship of the Book of Abraham to Joseph Smith's temple theology; and 5) the reception-history of the Book of Abraham by both critics and defenders, with a focus on the controversy surrounding Joseph Smith's translation of it.

As will be shown, Givens' attempt at a balanced portrayal of some of the difficulties and controversies surrounding the Book of Abraham eventually gives way to his ultimate conclusion that, at least in this case, it does not appear that Joseph Smith provided an English translation of an ancient text written by Abraham after all. Rather, for Givens, the evidence demonstrates that the Prophet mistakenly thought he was translating an ancient writing of Abraham from characters that were actually part of an ancient Egyptian text known as a Book of Breathings, while simultaneously creating a modern story of Abraham in his own fertile, if not divinely inspired, mind.

4. Terry Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). While my comments herein are directed at Givens, since he is the author of this volume, this should not diminish the fact that Hauglid's views are also represented and are thus being reviewed as well. Hauglid's views can more clearly be seen in his recently published article: Brian M. Hauglid, "Translating an Alphabet to the Book of Abraham" *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, eds. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 363-89.

After outlining some problems surrounding Joseph Smith's explanations of the Egyptian vignettes and other evidence that appears to demonstrate the Prophet used the Book of Breathing as his source for "translating" the Book of Abraham, Givens concludes:

Smith certainly believed that he was successfully rendering the actual Egyptian symbols into their English counterparts. In the case of the facsimiles he was apparently wrong, and in the case of the Book of Abraham narrative he may have been as well.⁵

Accepting the possibility that Joseph Smith was wrong in spite of what he "certainly believed" himself to be doing, Givens attempts to give the Prophet some margin of piety and sensibility by choosing to "broaden or complicate reductive ways" of viewing what it might have meant for Joseph Smith to "translate."⁶

In his last section entitled "From Mummies to Scripture: Rethinking Translation," Givens proposes four different ways to view "translating" in the context of the Book of Abraham, providing more nuanced and creative ways to frame this word than what Latter-day Saints have typically understood. This recasting of the term can appear to make sense of the evidence that Givens presents and seems like an earnest attempt to mollify the difficulties surrounding Joseph Smith's claims in light of contrary evidence. However, there is evidence that was overlooked, glossed, or misunderstood that seriously questions the conclusions that spurred Givens' fourfold reframing in the first place. Reviewing this evidence and Givens' four-fold proposal allows for some discussion, again, of the main controversies surrounding Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham as well as an opportunity to clarify what Joseph Smith is doing with illustrations on the papyri he possessed.

There are, as usual, insightful perspectives about the Restoration movement that Givens brings to the table in his work. However, due to his and Brian Hauglid's associations with Brigham Young University and because of the high consumption of Givens' works in the Latter-day Saint faith community, it is important to raise awareness of the evidence that contradicts their attempt to alter the language of that community in this moment. This is not to cast a shadow over everything else these fine scholars have done, but it is important to demonstrate that the conclusions that these and other scholars make with respect to the Book of Abraham translation are not as inevitable as they portray.

5. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 180 of 285, Kindle.

6. *Ibid.*, 184.

I. Symbolic/Esoteric Translation

In his first attempt to recast Joseph Smith’s “translation” efforts, Givens proposes that the Prophet, like others of his day, may have erroneously viewed the individual Egyptian characters on the Book of Breathings papyri as packed full of esoteric and symbolic meaning, not as the uni-, bi-, multi-literal phonemes and classifiers that form the pronunciation and meaning of actual words and sentences conveying Egyptian thought. Consequently, Joseph Smith may have thought he was mystically unpacking paragraphs of Abrahamic text from single characters on the Book of Breathings papyrus based on a mistaken belief that Abraham, the Egyptians, or some other ancient had embedded sentences and paragraphs of ideas related to Abraham into each character via their mystical ability.

“That Smith fully embraced this cultural preconception seems manifest in the earliest manuscripts of the Book of Abraham,” Givens declares.⁷ The Kirtland era manuscripts to which Givens refers include multiple copies of an “Egyptian Alphabet” (EA), a single “Egyptian Counting” document, a single “Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language” (GAEL) and multiple manuscript copies of the Book of Abraham along with a few other documents. All were recently published in the Joseph Smith Papers collection.⁸ Some characters from the Egyptian Book of Breathings that Joseph Smith possessed appear in the left margins of the EA, GAEL, and the Book of Abraham manuscripts. On the EA and GAEL, many of the characters have what appears to be a name or pronunciation and additional English words and phrases written to their right, including many words and phrases found in the Book of Abraham. Further, in the EA/GAEL, some of the left-margin characters will repeat, with earlier repetitions having simple words or phrases in the English text on the right, while later repetitions seem to expand the words or phrases into fuller sentences or paragraphs, many found in the Book of Abraham. This can give an appearance that Joseph Smith and his scribes “fully embraced” the idea of extracting expanding layers of meaning from the character in the left margin.

In spite of Givens agreeing that “the relationship between the Abraham/Egyptian Papers and the Book of Abraham is far from settled . . . ,” stating that “this is not to say that we know how these two projects were related to each other in the minds of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries

7. Ibid., 188.

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

and, therefore, exactly how the translation of the Book of Abraham came about,” and mentioning that “the possibility that he dictated the text in a flow of oracular inspiration cannot be entirely ruled out,”⁹ he contradicts himself in the final analysis by asserting that the EA/GAEL documents are Joseph Smith’s intellectual and collaborative effort with his scribes to derive esoteric meaning and an Egyptian grammar from the Book of Breathing characters “en route” to producing the Book of Abraham, and that the Book of Abraham was not a free-flowing text given to him by revelation in likeness of the Book of Mormon:

“The Book of Abraham manuscripts, unlike their Book of Mormon counterpart, bear clear evidence of reworking, revising, and editing. This was no spontaneous channeling of a finished product by any stretch ... What the surviving documents reveal is a remarkably complex, multilayered grammar that Smith constructed en route to deciphering the hieroglyphics.”¹⁰

Since Givens appears to have adopted the view that Joseph Smith and his scribes ultimately derive the Book of Abraham from Egyptian characters that make up an ancient Egyptian Book of Breathings, not from characters that make up a text about Abraham, Givens further asserts that

His system has no basis in linguistics and does not pass the muster with any Egyptologist; but the considerable labor and sheer inventiveness evident in the project provide a remarkable window into his methodology and imagination.”¹¹

Asserting the idea that Joseph Smith used the EA/GAEL as working papers for creating the Book of Abraham manuscripts appears reasonable at first glance, but it is a highly problematic theory when all the evidence is considered and carefully weighed. The following five sections offer a sample of the many evidences not addressed or glossed over by Givens that seriously question the viability of such a theory.

The 1835 Sources

Givens states, “What seems clear from the 1835 historical record and an analysis of the 1835 Abraham manuscripts and the grammar and alphabet manuscripts is that they were created roughly at the same time.”¹² An exacting look at the 1835 sources, however, demonstrates

9. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 173-74, 188.

10. *Ibid.*, 201.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 173.

that this statement is not accurate. According to these sources, Joseph Smith began providing the text of the Book of Abraham in the first days he obtained the papyri in early July 1835, before any mention of an EA/GAEL.¹³ Text from the first chapter of the Book of Abraham is used by Oliver Cowdery in a preface to a blessing he recorded in September 1835,¹⁴ and the late August 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants uses unique material from Book of Abraham chapter 3.¹⁵

13. In a July 20, 1835 letter to his wife Sally, William W. Phelps explained that some mummies and papyri were brought to Kirtland a few weeks earlier and “[a]s no one could translate [the Egyptian papyri] they were presented to President Smith. He soon knew what they were and said they, the ‘rolls of papyrus,’ contained a sacred record kept by Joseph in Pharaoh’s [sic] Court in Egypt, and the teachings of Father Abraham.” (Leah Y. Phelps, “Letters of Faith from Kirtland,” *Improvement Era* 45 [August 1942]: 529, <https://archive.org/details/improvementera4508unse/page/n49/mode/2up>; see also Bruce A. Van-Orden, “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835-1836),” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 [1993]: 554, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol33/iss3/9/>). Earlier in the same letter, Phelps mentions that that he had just received her letter the prior evening and that Joseph Smith said his emotion was the same reading her letter “as it was when reading the history of Joseph in Egypt” (Ibid., 555). It is not clear to what history Joseph Smith was referring, but the context does not rule out the possibility that he was referencing the writings of Joseph claimed to be on the papyri. A later Sept. 11, 1835 letter from Phelps to his wife mentioned that “[n]othing has been doing in the translation of the Egyptian Record for a long time,” suggesting that some translation had occurred earlier (Ibid., 563). O. Cowdery’s letter to William Frye, published in the Dec. 1835 Messenger and Advocate, indicates that on the first day that Michael Chandler met with Joseph Smith about the papyri: “Being solicited by Mr. Chandler to give an opinion concerning his antiquities, or translation of some of the characters, bro. S[mith] gave him the interpretation of some few for his satisfaction” (Oliver Cowdery, “Egyptian Mummies” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* II, no. 3 [Dec. 1835]: 235).

14. Oliver Cowdery’s preface includes the following seeming paraphrase from the Book of Abraham: “we diligently sought for the right of the fathers, and the authority of the holy priesthood, and the power to admin in the same: for we desired to be followers of righteousness and the possessors of greater knowledge,” (Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents Vol. 2* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999], 451-54, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/priesthood-restoration?p=1&highlight=we%20diligently%20sought%20for%20the%20right%20of%20the%20fathers>).

15. The proper name Shinehah from the Book of Abraham appears as a code word in Doctrine and Covenants (1835) 98:9 (“Doctrine and Covenants, 1835,” p. 243, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/251>).

These sources suggest that Joseph Smith may have revealed text into Abraham 3 by the end of the summer of 1835.¹⁶

In contrast, the first mention in the 1835 sources of an EA or GAEL being created is an October 1835 entry in Joseph Smith's journal.¹⁷ Significantly, the entry mentions that William Phelps, Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery worked on an EA, and the three EA documents in the Joseph Smith Papers collection are in their handwriting. There are no other EA papers in the collection. This is strong evidence that these documents are the very ones mentioned in the October 1835 entry and should be dated to that month. The GAEL is likely of later date as it appears to copy from the EA and expand it.¹⁸

This same October 1835 entry mentions that "The system of astronomy was unfolded." But the source is not clear on what is meant and could have multiple interpretations:

- a) It could be indicating that the system of astronomy found in Abraham 3 was first revealed on October 1, but this would require dismissing the evidence that suggests Abraham 3 was revealed earlier.
- b) Brian Hauglid suggests that since the unfolding of a system of astronomy was mentioned in the same entry that mentions the creation of the EA, then the EA itself may be the revealed unfolding of the system and Abraham 3 was

16. Later 1835 sources, including some Abraham 3 material in the EA/GAEL themselves and a Dec. 1835 entry in Joseph Smith's journal that mentions he showed the Egyptian records to Brigham Young, William E. McLellin, and Jared Carter and "explained many things to them concerning the dealings of God with the ancient <s> and the formation of the planetary System," can all be viewed as corroborative evidence supporting the idea that Abraham 3, which outlines a system of astronomy, had already been revealed by Joseph Smith. For more evidence of Abraham 3 being translated in 1835 see Kerry Muhlestein and Megan Hansen, "'The Work of Translating': The Book of Abraham's Translation Chronology," in *Let Us Reason Together: Essays in Honor of the Life's Work of Robert L. Millet*, eds. J. Spencer Fluhman and Brent L. Top (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: 2016), 139-62. Hauglid's argument that the unique Abraham 3 material in the August 1835 Doctrine and Covenants could have been discerned independent of the Book of Abraham is only conjecture and glosses a crucial source (see Hauglid, "Translating an Alphabet to the Book of Abraham," 370n35).

17. Joseph Smith, "Journal, 1835-1836," p. 3, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/4>.

18. Portions of "the Egyptian Alphabet documents were later copied into the Grammar and Alphabet volume" (Jensen and Hauglid, introduction to *Revelations and Translations: Volume 4*).

“translated” later in Nauvoo and based on the EA/GAEL.¹⁹ However, no system of astronomy appears in the EA. There is a mention of Kolob and a few other astronomical terms that also appear in the Book of Abraham, again suggesting that chapter 3 had already been translated, but certainly no “system” is explained or outlined in the EA. The GAEL contains some passages that attempt to explain astronomical relationships, but this document is created later. On the difference between the system in the GAEL and the system in Abraham 3, see below.

19. Hauglid, “Translating an Alphabet to the Book of Abraham,” 370. Hauglid asserts that everything beyond Abraham 2:18 of the current versification, the extent of the verses found on the Kirtland era copies of the missing original Book of Abraham translation document, was translated on the two days (Mar. 8-9) between the first and second published installments of the Book of Abraham in Nauvoo 1842 (Ibid., 372-75). These journal entries mention he both translated and revised during this interim. Contrary to Hauglid’s view, the following timeline makes more sense of the evidence as it currently stands: Due to material from Abraham 3 referenced in 1835 and later sources, Joseph Smith appears to have translated at least into Abraham 3 prior to Aug. 1835. Additional translation occurred in or beyond Abraham 3 in the days between Oct. 1 and late Nov. 1835 when the last entry indicating that he translated that year appears in Joseph Smith’s journal. How far they went in the story of Abraham during 1835 cannot be determined. When the Prophet returns to translating and also revising after the first installment is published in Nauvoo in 1842, some of the material he translates appears to have been prepared for the second installment as stated in his journal: “Commenced Translating from the Book of Abraham, for the 10 No of the Times and Seasons” (“Journal, December 1841-December 1842,” p. 89, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1841-december-1842/20>). Nothing precludes material from the later end of the published chapters (e.g., Abraham 5) to have been translated during this time, contra Gee as well as Muhlestein and Hansen’s leanings, since it is difficult to know how far they got in 1835. Such would satisfy the above journal entry’s claim. But nothing in the sources require Abraham 3 to be translated at this time as Hauglid asserts. It makes more sense of the sources to conclude that Abraham 3 had already been translated but was part of the revision work that Joseph Smith also said he did prior to publication of the second installment in the Mar. 15, 1842 issue. Revisions that could have allowed Joseph Smith to incorporate addition clarifications and understanding from his Hebrew studies, etc. In other words, Joseph both translated and revised for the Mar. 15, 1842 just as his journal claims. Hauglid, “Translating an Alphabet to the Book of Abraham,” 369 also attempts to make the EA part of Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission by suggesting that the “unfolding” of the system of astronomy means that the Egyptian Alphabet in the previous line of the Oct. 1 entry was an unfolding revelation also, but this is not what the text actually says.

- c) It could indicate that the astronomical material in Abraham 3 was translated in the summer of 1835 but an additional astronomical system was “unfolded” on October 1. This additional material could be an understanding of the astronomy in the vignette for Facsimile #2, or it could be the additional astronomical material promised in the Book of Abraham narrative itself:

“But the records of the fathers, even the Patriarchs, concerning the right of Priesthood, the Lord my God preserved in mine own hands, therefore a knowledge of the beginning of the creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars, as they were made known unto the fathers, have I kept even unto this day, and I shall endeavor to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity that shall come after me.”²⁰

A system of astronomy as “made known unto the fathers” was already in the records that Abraham possessed, but the system of astronomy he learned in Abraham 3 came by means of a revelation through the Urim and Thummim.²¹ Abraham, however, promised to write what the fathers understood concerning the planets and stars. Additionally, the narrative indicates that Abraham received his revelation concerning astronomy (Abraham 3) *before* he entered Egypt, but Joseph Smith’s caption for Facsimile #3 indicates that Abraham also taught astronomy *later* when in Egypt. If this October 1 entry is referring to some later system of astronomy in the narrative, this would insinuate that a great deal more of the Book of Abraham was translated by October 1 than was ever published, but such a proposition is unlikely given that we do not have record of many days spent translating prior to this date.

- d) Perhaps the simplest interpretation is that although Joseph Smith appears to have revealed the English text of the Book of Abraham into chapter 3 sometime

20. “Book of Abraham and Facsimiles, 1 March-16 May 1842,” p. 705, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-and-facsimiles-1-march-16-may-1842/3>.

21. *Ibid.*, 719, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-and-facsimiles-1-march-16-may-1842/5>.

prior to September 1835, their understanding of this system of astronomy was “unfolded” on October 1 in a way that Joseph Smith began to understand better its meaning or, as John Gee suggests, an understanding of astronomy relative to Facsimile #2 may have been unfolded.²²

Almost a decade later, one entry in the Manuscript History of the Church suggests that the EA/GAEL was started in July 1835, but this is not consistent with the contemporary 1835 written evidence. Further, the source of this entry is unknown and seems to have been a later generalization, as it was appended to the end of all the July entries without a specific date. These and other factors²³ make the actual timing of this entry suspect at best without corroborative evidence. Givens and others rely on this much later source, not those from 1835, to assert that the EA/GAEL were created at roughly the same time as the Book of Abraham or that the EA/GAEL were the working papers for creating the Book of Abraham. Giving priority to or uncritically accepting a roughly decade-later, single entry of unknown origin over clearer, more contemporary sources is not sound methodology.

Later 1835 journal entries indicate that Joseph Smith continued to translate more passages of the Book of Abraham after the EA was started in early October, but if one follows the 1835 evidence strictly, the Book of Abraham phrases that actually appear in the EA/GAEL were already revealed prior to their appearance in these documents. Consequently, any theory that the EA/GAEL were started at the same time or were part of the production of the Book of Abraham text based on the 1835 sources is straining the evidence.

22. See John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), loc. 247, 268-76 of 2126, Kindle.

23. It is believed that Joseph Smith did not review or edit this volume of the *History of the Church* for accuracy (see “History, 1838-1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834-2 November 1838],” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/1>). Also, William Phelps’ known involvement in projects similar to the EA/GAEL prior to the acquisition of the Egyptian papyri (discussed below) could potentially cause confusion in later recollections of the exact timing of the EA/GAEL, so preference should be given to contemporary records.

Relationships between Documents

Givens notes the truism that similar texts shared between the EA/GAEL and Book of Abraham manuscripts “suggests some relationship between the production of both sets of documents” and “in the most conspicuous instance, there is a clear correspondence between Abraham 1:1–3 and the grammar and alphabet book.”²⁴ There is certainly a relationship between the EA/GAEL and the Book of Abraham manuscripts, but it is the nature of this relationship that is far from clear. But in spite of this lack of clarity, Givens asserts the EA/GAEL demonstrate that Joseph Smith was “attacking the task [of translating the Book of Abraham] as an amateur linguist and working cooperatively with colleagues,”²⁵ providing “a remarkable window into his methodology and imagination” as noted above.

Whatever relationship the EA/GAEL have to the currently existing Book of Abraham manuscripts, it is important to highlight a very critical point that Givens neglects to mention: the extant manuscripts of the Book of Abraham are widely recognized as copies of an earlier original manuscript that is now lost.²⁶ The 1835 evidence recommends that the lone three verses that Phelps wrote on one of the manuscripts (Abraham 1:1–3) were the earliest translated. Sources indicate that he (along with Oliver Cowdery, whose hand does not appear on any of the extant Abraham manuscripts) was an initial scribe to the Prophet for his earliest translation efforts of the Book of Abraham in July.²⁷ The other extant Book of Abraham manuscripts from the Kirtland era are in the hand of Joseph Smith’s later Kirtland scribes, Frederick G. Williams and

24. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 173.

25. Ibid.

26. “Textual evidence suggests that these Book of Abraham texts were based on an earlier manuscript that is no longer extant” (“Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July-circa November 1835-A [Abraham 1:4-2:6],” Historical Introduction, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-manuscript-circa-july-circa-november-1835-a-abraham-14-26/1>; “The earliest surviving manuscript of the Book of Abraham, probably written in early October 1835 in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams, contains a long dittography (a repetition of part of the manuscript), which is characteristic of copied manuscripts — not dictated ones” (Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, loc. 399 of 2126, Kindle).

27. It is not out of the realm of possibility that these three verses are “the interpretation of some few” that Joseph Smith gave to Chandler in early July according to Oliver Cowdery’s recollection in his December 1835 letter to William Frye (Cowdery, “Egyptian Mummies”).

Warren Parrish, and start at Abraham 1:4 where Phelps had left off. The evidence strongly indicates that Williams' manuscript appears to have been copied from an earlier manuscript now missing, and Parrish then copies and corrects William's manuscript.²⁸ Parrish then makes another copy of these verses onto the manuscript that Phelps had begun, creating a single document of the verses in this set of manuscripts.²⁹

Since the manuscripts are mostly, if not completely, copies of a missing original, Givens' claim that they give one insight into Joseph Smith's

28. John Gee, "Fantasy vs. Reality," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* (forthcoming).

29. The Phelps/Parrish manuscript could be understood as an effort to produce a "printer's manuscript." Phelps had mentioned in his July 20, 1835 letter to his wife their intention of publishing the Book of Abraham even at that early date, so it is not unreasonable to think that a printer's copy may have been started in Kirtland, though never published at that time (Van-Orden, "Writing to Zion," 9-10). That they were attempting to publish the record long before Nauvoo is clear from a Nov. 5, 1837 meeting wherein the church voted to "sanction the appointment of the Presidents in authorizing Brother [Willard] Richards & Brother Hadlock [Reuben Hedlock], to transact the business of the Church in procuring the means to translate & print those records taken from the chatacombs of Egypt, now in the temple." ("Minute Book 1," p. 259, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-1/263>). Having an original translation manuscript and separate copy for printing would be in keeping with the pattern that Joseph Smith and his scribes followed before with the Book of Mormon. In this framework, the editing and markups in the surviving Abraham manuscripts would not be indicative of a struggling, collaborative, intellectually fluid *translation* process as Givens asserts — such could only be determined by viewing the original manuscript — but of editorial preparations for publication. This would explain why the Phelps/Parrish copy of the extant manuscripts covers the same verses published in the first installment of the Book of Abraham when it was finally printed in Nauvoo — not because that was necessarily all they had translated (again only the missing original manuscript could reveal the true extent) but because this was as far as they got in their effort to create a printer's copy while in Kirtland. The Phelps/Parrish manuscript was likely used to make a cleaner final copy for the printer in Nauvoo for the first installment of its publication in the Times and Seasons newspaper. If the Kirtland manuscripts were part of a preparation for printing, then the editorial insertions clearly made on Richard's manuscript copy (see ("Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July-circa November 1835-A [Abraham 1:4-2:6]," 2-3) that refer the reader to the images of the altar and gods placed "at the commencement of this record" and "at the beginning" (Abraham 1:12, 14) should be understood as the editor, not Abraham, directing the readers to an image at the commencement of the planned publication ("this record"), not at the commencement of Abraham's record. Facsimile #1 was indeed placed at the commencement of the Book of Abraham text when it was published.

“methodology and imagination” for producing the original Book of Abraham text is highly problematic. Sound scholarship dictates that one should not assume that whatever relationship the EA/GAEL have to the extant manuscript copies of the Book of Abraham is indicative of their relationship to the original translation manuscript, and thus reveal the methodology by which Joseph Smith “translated.” That is not a controlled interpretation of the evidence. Further, the supposed dependence of Phelps’ original creation of Abraham 1:1–3 on the GAEL that Givens cites in his footnote is much too speculative and problematic to use as a basis for this conclusion; it is certainly not “clear.”³⁰ Does the missing original manuscript also have Egyptian characters in its margin? Can it be shown to have a demonstrable dependence on the EA or GAEL? Without this original manuscript, there is no way to test the assumptions that Givens can only assert throughout his chapter.

Direct Revelation vs. Collaborative Intellectual Effort

Since Givens assumes that the EA and the GAEL are an integral part of Joseph Smith’s effort to produce the original Book of Abraham manuscript, he stresses that “the process by which [Joseph Smith] produced the Book of Abraham was of a different category altogether from that of his 1829 production of the Book of Mormon.”³¹ The Prophet “wrestled with the Book of Abraham, using seer stones or not, on and off for seven years,”³² and “his approach was one that combined prolonged and collaborative intellectual effort along with ‘direct inspiration of Heaven,’ as one transcriber noted.”³³

Givens’ footnote about this transcriber, Warren Parrish, states: “Parrish’s is the only contemporary, firsthand account of Smith’s translation method, and it gives no details other than the quoted expression.”³⁴ Actually, Parrish provides additional, even crucial, detail that Givens left out in this moment. The full testimony is thus: “I have set by his side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian

30. Jeff Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019): 71-76.

31. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 173.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 201.

34. *Ibid.*, 221.

Hieroglyphicks as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration of Heaven.”³⁵

As the only scribal witness reporting how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham, Parrish’s testimony should not be so glossed over. Writing down the translation “as” Joseph Smith received it “direct” from heaven does not sound like there was any “prolonged and collaborative intellectual effort” in this process. Contrary to Givens’ belief that the Book of Abraham translation “was no spontaneous channeling of a finished product by any stretch,” Parrish’s testimony, one of the principal sources that really matters, does indeed sound like the Book of Abraham was produced in much the same way Joseph Smith brought forth the Book of Mormon — by simply dictating, or spontaneously channeling, the translation as he received it from heaven. Note the similarities (highlighted with italics) between Parrish’s testimony above and Oliver Cowdery’s, who was scribe for the spontaneous channeling of the Book of Mormon:

“These were days never to be forgotten — to *sit under* the sound of a voice dictated by the *inspiration of heaven*, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, *to write* from his mouth, *as he translated*, . . .”³⁶

As an aside, it is important to also note that Parrish claims Joseph Smith was translating “the” hieroglyphics, suggesting that, at the time, Parrish assumed that the Prophet was bringing forth the Book of Abraham from actual text on the papyri, not catalyzed thereby.

Givens himself notes other historical sources that refute his own claim that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham through “prolonged and collaborative intellectual effort.” Regrettably, Givens glosses over this evidence as well, stating, “That Smith employed the Urim and Thummim, or seer stone, is entirely likely. However, his employment of such a device should in no way obscure *the fact* that the process by which he produced the Book of Abraham was of a different category altogether from that of his 1829 production of the Book of Mormon.”³⁷ Asserting this “fact,” however, requires Givens to dismiss all the contemporary

35. Warren Parrish, letter to the editor, *Painesville Republican*, 15 February 1838, <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/OH/painerep.htm#021538>.

36. Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps, 7 Sept. 1834, *LDS Messenger and Advocate*, October 1834, 1:14, <https://archive.org/details/LDSMessengerAndAdvocate18341837/page/n13/mode/2up>, emphasis added, except “inspiration” is italicized in the original.

37. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 173, emphasis added.

evidence that explicitly states otherwise and to ignore the problem of having no evidence that explicitly supports his claim.

The Relationship of the Margin Characters

On the surface, the affiliations between the EA/GAEL and Book of Abraham text appear to demonstrate that the EA/GAEL were Joseph Smith's and his collaborators' effort to extract — through a pseudo-intellectual and inspirational exercise — expanding degrees of meanings from the Egyptian characters on the papyri and then use these expanding meanings to ultimately create their final meanings in the Book of Abraham manuscripts. The marginal characters and their name/pronunciation in the EA/GAEL can be shown to repeat and the English text next to each repetition does seem to expand and become more elaborate. However (and this is an important distinction), the same margin-character is *not* carried over and associated with a similar text in the Book of Abraham manuscripts as one would expect if Givens' assumptions are to be followed logically. In fact, only one of the 170 characters in the left margin of the EA/GAEL having English text next to it loosely matches the same character and accompanying text on the Book of Abraham manuscript copies.³⁸ In other words, any similar English words or passages shared between the EA/GAEL and the Book of Abraham manuscripts actually have different Egyptian and other characters in the left margin. Conversely, any similar marginal characters between the EA/GAEL and the Book of Abraham manuscripts do not have English texts that relate next to them. Further, the Egyptian characters in EA/GAEL are generally from one fragment of papyri (JSPI), but those in the Abraham manuscripts are from a different fragment (JSPXI). Givens has not provided any logical explanation for these major disconnects between the EA/GAEL and Book of Abraham manuscripts — disconnects that seriously call into question the kind of relationship he suggests they have to one another.

Further, many of the margin characters in EA/GAEL are not even Egyptian, and in the Egyptian Counting document, *none* of the margin characters are Egyptian, despite its title. Some of the characters are known

38. See Kerry Muhlestein, "Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 34. Final details noted by John Gee and Kerry Muhlestein, "The Translation of the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* (forthcoming).

from standard masonic ciphers typically used to cryptographically encode meaning into symbols that one could later decode if they had the key.³⁹ Additionally, not all the English texts in the EA/GAEL that Joseph Smith is supposedly “translating” in that moment relate to the Book of Abraham; some of the text appears to draw from revelations that Joseph Smith produced earlier, including D&C 76 and 88.⁴⁰ This strengthens the case that the Book of Abraham passages in the EA/GAEL were likely pre-existing texts as well, just as the 1835 sources suggest.

In fact, before Joseph Smith even acquired the Egyptian papyri, William Phelps had created documents like the EA/GAEL and sent a sample to his wife in a May 1835 letter.⁴¹ This document was organized with non-Egyptian characters on the left, a name or pronunciation to its right, and non-Abrahamic ideas/texts in English next to them just like the EA/GAEL. Later, Phelps copies these same non-Egyptian characters that he sent his wife, in their exact same sequence, into the EA, but in that document he gives them different names/pronunciations and connects them to passages from the Book of Abraham.⁴² If Joseph Smith was supposedly translating the Book of Abraham from the Egyptian characters on the Breathing papyri, why are passages from the Book of Abraham associated with non-Egyptian characters in the EA that Phelps

39. Noted in William Schryver, “The Kirtland Egyptian Papers” (presentation, 2010 FairMormon Conference, August 5 and 6, 2010, Sandy, UT), <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2010/the-meaning-of-the-kirtland-egyptian-papers-part-i>.

40. In the EA four margin-characters appear in immediate sequence with the names/pronunciations “Ebeth=ka,” “Kah tu ain tri eth,” “Kah tu ain,” and “Dah tu Hahdess Hahdees” (EA, 2). These same characters and names are repeated and described throughout the GAEL as “Ebethka. The celestial Kingdom where God dwells” (GAEL, 29); “Kahtu ain trieth: an other Kingdom. govnrned by different laws. a second king. or governed by another, or second person not having been exalted” (GAEL, 27); Kahtu=aim: Another Kingdom governed by different laws, composed of subjects who receive their place at a future period, and governed by those who are under the directions of another; a kingdom whose subject differ one from another <in glory>; who come not into the pres behold not the face of of God” (GAEL, 23), and “Dah tu Hah dees: Hell another Kingdom; the least kingdom, or kingdom without glory; the whole kingdom and dom[a]in of darkness, with all its degrees and parts. governed by the Doagrass him who is an enemy to G<o>od” (GAEL, 33), following the sequence and some phraseology relative to the three degrees of glory and kingdom of no glory in D&C 76 & 88 (see, e.g., D&C 76:98 which shares the same phrase “differ(s) one from another in glory”). Noted in Schryver, “The Kirtland Egyptian Papers.”

41. William W. Phelps to Sally Waterman Phelps, 26 May 1835, William W. Phelps Papers, Brigham Young University.

42. Schryver, “The Kirtland Egyptian Papers.”

had used previously, having the same sequence and format but with different names and English texts? Givens provides no explanation for this evidence that calls into question his assertions.

The above has led some to conclude that the EA/GAEL documents may be better understood as cipher keys, with Phelps leading a project to encode ideas from Joseph Smith's revelations into the various characters, including some from the papyri and some from masonic ciphers, among others.⁴³ The use of Masonic cipher characters would not be unusual since Phelps had been a Master Mason prior to his involvement with the papyri.⁴⁴

Though this theory is a more logical view of the evidence than what Givens promotes, as it explains the use of masonic ciphers and other non-Egyptian characters in the EA/GAEL as well as non-Book of Abraham material, it also falls short of explaining the relationship of the EA/GAEL to the extant Book of Abraham manuscripts. Why would the two seemingly related sets of documents not use the same character for encoding similar texts?

Examining Astronomical Systems

The astronomical system described in the GAEL is different than the astronomical system described in Abraham 3. It appears that some of Joseph Smith's contemporaries may have misunderstood and misinterpreted Abraham 3 and Facsimile #3, assuming that they reflected a model where lesser bodies orbited and thus were governed by greater more central bodies — e.g., the sun, earth, moon, and other “moving” planets orbited and were governed by “central,” “fixed” bodies, and

43. Ibid.

44. “having been regularly initiated, passed and raised to the degree of Master Mason, I hereby withdraw myself from any connection with masonic lodges, and renounce the self-organized institution of freemasonry” (W. W. Phelps, “Renunciation,” *The Lake Light*, January 14, 1828, <http://www.olivercowdery.com/smithhome/Phelps/PhelpsIndex.htm>; and reprinted in the *Seneca Farmer, and Waterloo Advertiser* V, no. 28 [February 6, 1828]).

everything orbited Kolob and God at the center of the “Mormon Solar System.”⁴⁵ The GAEL reflects such a post-Copernican-influenced view.⁴⁶

In contrast, the Book of Abraham text is more reflective of a pre-Copernican geocentric model, more in keeping with the views of

45. My thanks to Derek Jensen for pointing this out. See his “One of Them Was Nearest unto the Throne of God’: Nineteenth-Century Cosmologies and the Book of Abraham,” *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows Paper 2000-2002*, ed. by Richard L. Bushman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2005). James G. Bennett “More Prophecy,” *New York Herald*, Apr 5, 1842; used the phrase “Mormon Solar System” to describe the “curious map” of Facsimile #2; reprinted in the *Times and Seasons* (2 May 1842), 773-74 (thanks to Derek Jensen for this reference). See also Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology” in *The Word of God*, ed. by Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 187-212; however, their ability to discern the ancient geocentric cosmology in the Book of Abraham is obscured due to their reliance on 19th century sources, including the GAEL, to interpret the text.

46. The GAEL describes a system with three “grand central” stars, along with 12 other “fixed” stars (15 total), governing another set of 15 “moving” planets/stars, which included the earth, sun, and moon: “The earth under the governing <powers > of oliblish, Enish go on dosh, and Kae-e van rash, which are the grand governing key or in other words, the governing power, which governs the fifteen fixed stars <(twelve [2 words illegible])> that belong governs the earth, sun, & moon, (which have their power <in> one,) with the other twelve moving planets of this system. Oliblish=Enish go on dosh, and Kaii , en rash, are the three grand central stars which powers that govern all the other creations, which have been sought out by the most aged of all the fathers, since the begining of the creation, by means of the urim and Thummim: The names of the other twelve of the fixed stars are: ...” (p. 24). The GAEL also speaks of these fixed stars having light at the “centre” from which all the other heavenly bodies draw their light: “The gover[n]ing principle of light Because God has said Let this be the centre for light, and let there be bounds that it may not pass. He hath set a cloud round about in the heavens, and the light of the grand govering of <15> fixed stars centre there; and from there its is drawn, by the heavenly bodies according to their portions;” (p. 25). “The King of day or the central moving planet, from which the other governing moving planets receive their light.— having a less motion— slow in its motion— The earth’s chief Joy.” (p. 31). The central bodies appear to be “slow” in their motion when compared to those heavenly bodies immediately orbiting them. Since the explanations published with Facsimile #2 identifies the central character as Kolob, it is understandable that some might interpret this, and thus the Book of Abraham text, to reflect a Kolob/God-is-at-the-center view of the universe (see, for example, Kerry Muhlestein, “Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 1 [2009], 38-43), but since two of the outer, non-central, characters in Facsimile #2 are identified as “God on his throne,” such an interpretation overlooks evidence that questions the conclusion made.

ancient civilizations of Abraham's day, such as Egypt.⁴⁷ This suggests that the principal author of the GAEL, William W. Phelps, may have misinterpreted the astronomical system outlined in the Book of Abraham when he created this document due to the modern scientific context of his day. This contradicts somewhat the idea that the GAEL and its system of astronomy was a basis for the Book of Abraham astronomy.

The above examples are a small selection of evidence to demonstrate that Givens' assertion that the EA/GAEL reveal Joseph Smith's "methodology and creativity" for translating the Book of Abraham from the Egyptian papyri is much too simplistic a view. It leaves many problems unexplained and overlooks crucial evidence that contradicts the "facts" as he presents them.

II. Bricolage

Givens likens Joseph Smith's effort to "translate" the Book of Abraham to bricolage. *Bricolage* is the art of repurposing objects into a new interpretation or new creation of the present — a modern example is the genre of art known as "junk art" or "found art." As such, bricolage abandons any effort to understand the used object's original setting or purpose. Such is not necessary, for bricolage is an appropriation and new creation, an improvisation loosely based on the shape or color of the object, not what the object actually is. Givens declares that bricolage "was the very basis of [Joseph Smith's] methodology of Restoration."⁴⁸

Since the original setting and purpose of objects are of no concern in bricolage, Givens proposes that the Book of Abraham may have been a sort of improvisation based on what the papyri merely suggested, not what they really were. Consequently, he suggests that the Book of Abraham may not have been an actual "restored" or "preserved" text from antiquity, rather:

Smith's transposition of the Egyptian papyri into the Book of Abraham may model [a] "produced" type of text ... Both the notion of bricolage and Elijah's textual transformation seem in keeping with David Bokovoy's hypothesis of the Book of Abraham as "inspired pseudepigrapha," ... [where] one "need not believe that the Book of Abraham is a supernatural, though traditional, translation of an ancient text written by

47. John Gee, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson, "And I Saw the Stars": *The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy*," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, eds. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2005), 1-16.

48. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 193.

the patriarch Abraham, nor the translation of a Hellenized pseudepigraphic book of Abraham originally written in the first century bc.” Instead, he [Bokovoy] explains, “it can make even more sense that by engaging the ancient papyri, the Prophet Joseph was inspired to produce this book of scripture as author, or in his vernacular, ‘seer/translator.’”⁴⁹

Givens is proposing in this section that the Egyptian papyri and their vignettes may have inspired Joseph Smith to produce a modern work that he *falsely attributes* (the meaning of the term pseudepigrapha) to Abraham. He did not render into English an ancient story written *by* Abraham. Consequently, the meaning and purpose of the papyri in their original setting is not important, for this is a modern bricolage inspired by fragments that merely suggest antiquity but were wholly repurposed for a contemporary creation.

Based on what we know from the surviving fragments and copies of now missing papyri, it is evident that the three vignettes that Joseph Smith used to illustrate the Book of Abraham were not originally drawn on their respective papyri to illustrate a story about Abraham. Rather, their immediate use was to illustrate texts and/or represent ideas in the ancient Egyptian religion. These three vignettes were drawn on two different papyri, for two different owners, and likely came from two different burials. The original vignette for Facsimile #1 currently exists and is on a papyrus, now in fragments, that also contains a text belonging to a genre that Egyptologists call the Book of Breathing. Apart from being on the same papyrus, the vignette’s actual relationship to the text is uncertain since there are no other Book of Breathing texts with a similar vignette illustrating it, nor does the text seem to fully describe this vignette. It is possible that this picture represented some other aspect of the Egyptian religion entirely, rather than serving as an illustration for the Book of Breathing specifically.

The vignette for Facsimile #3 is currently missing but similar illustrations are attested in the Book of Breathing genre of ancient Egyptian religious texts.⁵⁰ This, coupled with the fact that the owner’s proper name written in Facsimile #3 is the same as the owner’s name in this Book of Breathing text, suggests that the vignette for Facsimile #3 was

49. Ibid.

50. Marc Coenen, “An Introduction to the Document of Breathing Made by Isis,” *Revue D’egyptologie* 49 (1998): 39-40. Quinten Barney, “The Neglected Facsimile: An Examination and Comparative Study of Facsimile No. 3 of the Book of Abraham,” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019), 65-70.

likely an illustration originally made to illustrate the Book of Breathings that Joseph Smith possessed. Although the vignettes for Facsimile #1 and #3 were on the same papyrus, they may have already been separated when Joseph Smith first acquired them due to the fragmented condition of this papyrus. The fragment containing the vignette for Facsimile #1 was glued onto paper by itself in Joseph Smith's day.⁵¹

The source for Facsimile #2 was a different papyrus of a larger vertical size and of a different shape and style compared to the Book of Breathings papyrus.⁵² It was created anciently for a different owner and is a document that Egyptologists call a hypocephalus due to its typical placement under or near the head of the deceased's corpse in burial.

The captions and texts within these three facsimiles express ideas and name gods relative to the ancient Egyptian religion. None mention Abraham nor details in the story of Abraham that Joseph Smith published.

In spite of an obvious difference in style, shape, and size between the hypocephalus papyrus and the other two vignettes that appeared on the Breathing papyrus, Joseph Smith published the facsimiles of all three as illustrations for the Book of Abraham text he was revealing. That he appears to have published all three facsimiles true to the size of their originals, with #2 much bigger than #1 and #3, indicates that Joseph Smith made no attempt to make them look as though they were copied from a common source.

Some of the original illustrations on the papyri were damaged and missing portions, so when Joseph Smith published their facsimiles, he or his scribes appear to have filled in some of these holes by copying texts or figures from elsewhere in the collection or drawing fillers themselves. Some of the Egyptian texts were even copied upside down, likely due to their inability to read the Egyptian on these papyri.

Why Joseph Smith had texts or figures copied from elsewhere in the papyri collection in order to fill holes in these three illustrations is not given in the historical sources. Some may assume that Joseph Smith was attempting to restore how the ancient Egyptians would have

51. "Source Note" for "Egyptian Papyri, circa 300 BC-AD 50," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/egyptian-papyri-circa-300-bc-ad-50/1>.

52. The facsimiles appear to have been created and published in the *Times and Seasons* true to their relative size. The hypocephalus was published on an insert much bigger than the two illustrations from the Book of Breathings papyrus. See "Book of Abraham and Facsimiles, 1 March–16 May 1842," p. 703, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-and-facsimiles-1-march-16-may-1842/1>.

originally depicted the missing portions, but this is conjecture. It is just as plausible, since he merely had texts and figures copied from elsewhere in the collection and did not pretend to restore anything unique where these holes exist, that his main purpose was to fill the holes for aesthetic or functional purposes relative to publishing, not to restore the original ancient Egyptian religious iconography.

Joseph Smith's published explanations for these illustrations associate many of the details in the facsimiles to the story and religious context of Abraham's life that he was revealing, but why he made those connections is not clear from the historical sources. Some may assume that Joseph Smith attempted to identify all the characters as they were originally understood by the ancient Egyptians, but this is mostly conjecture, though there are some notable exceptions discussed below. It is just as plausible that Joseph Smith was simply reinterpreting the ancient Egyptian iconography to fit the story of Abraham. Reinterpreting iconography or texts of one tradition to represent the figures or concepts in another tradition is an age-old practice among most cultures from antiquity to the present. For example, Christians in antiquity reinterpreted winged solar disks as representing God in their own religious worldview even though it was not originally created or understood that way by the Egyptians.⁵³ However, no scholar of antiquity would state that the Christians were wrong or ludicrous for reinterpreting the iconography that way, unless, of course, they assumed that the Christians were trying to explain how the Egyptians viewed winged solar disks.

Many of the explanations for the figures in the facsimiles published with the Book of Abraham are actually declared to be "representative," so one should take care not to assume that Joseph Smith was stating what they all originally meant to the Egyptians: "*represent* the pillars of heaven,"⁵⁴ "*signifying* expanse,"⁵⁵ "Is made to *represent* God,"⁵⁶ "*representing* also the grand Key-words of the Holy Priesthood,"⁵⁷ "the stars *represented* by numbers 22 and 23,"⁵⁸ "*represents* this earth,"⁵⁹

53. László Kákósy, "A Christian Interpretation of the Sun-Disk," in *Studies in Egyptian Religion: Dedicated to Professor Jan Zandee* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), 72–75.

54. "Book of Abraham and Facsimiles, 1 March–16 May 1842," 703.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., insert.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

“represents God,”⁶⁰ “representing the priesthood, as emblematical of the grand Presidency of Heaven,”⁶¹ “Signifies Abraham.”⁶²

In light of all the above, the simplest and probably best reason that these particular facsimiles and their explanations were published with the Book of Abraham is that Joseph Smith himself removed these three illustrations from their immediate Egyptian religious context and reinterpreted them to fit the story of Abraham he revealed. Nothing in the historical sources requires one to conclude, even if they are a believer in Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, that such were ever used anciently — whether in Abraham’s day or in the Greco-Roman time period in which the Joseph Smith papyri were created — as illustrations for an Abrahamic tradition.

The immediate context, identifying labels and captions, and much of the meaning for these three facsimiles in their ancient Egyptian religious setting is relatively known, though additional particulars are still being discovered and understood about them, and Joseph Smith appears to have taken them out of that context (though, again, some seemingly contrary details must still be dealt with as discussed below) and reinterpreted them. This seems to support, somewhat, Givens’ use of the term *bricolage*. However, there are two major problems with fully using that term.

Repurposing vs. Syncretizing the Egyptian Illustrations

Consistent with the definition of the term, classifying what Joseph Smith did as *bricolage* insinuates that he completely repurposed the vignettes from the papyri, creating something entirely new with no regard for the original context out of which those objects came. However, this does not quite fit the evidence. While Joseph Smith’s explanations appear to mostly reinterpret the figures as representative of details in the Abrahamic tradition he was revealing, he simultaneously attempts to explain some of the symbolic meaning of a few details in their ancient Egyptian context: “as understood by the Egyptians,”⁶³ “the Egyptians meant it to signify,”⁶⁴ “which is called by the Egyptians,”⁶⁵ “called by the

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 784.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid., 703.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid., insert.

Egyptians,”⁶⁶ “in Egyptian, signifying,”⁶⁷ “Is called in Egyptian,”⁶⁸ “is said by the Egyptians to be.”⁶⁹

Additionally, Joseph Smith explains that some of the details in the vignettes have corollary meanings to the ancient Hebrews as well. For example, in regard to Facsimile 1, Fig. 12, the explanation states that “the Egyptians meant it to signify Shaumau, to be high, or the heavens, answering to the Hebrew word, Shaumahyeem.”⁷⁰ Likewise, the Egyptian symbol in Facsimile 2, Fig. 4 “answers to the Hebrew word Raukeeyang, signifying expanse, or the firmament of the heavens; also a numerical figure in Egyptian signifying one thousand.”⁷¹

If Joseph Smith is reinterpreting the facsimiles with no regard for their original context as a term like bricolage suggests, then these attempts to recover some original ancient context and meaning needs to be explained but are mostly overlooked by Givens. If, on the other hand, Joseph Smith is reinterpreting the facsimiles through the typical practice of syncretism, then his efforts to simultaneously recover some original ancient meaning of the illustrations in their Egyptian context as well as reinterpret them into the Abrahamic context makes sense. It is often the case that when one culture reinterprets the iconography or text of another, they do it because a detail in one culture is similar to a detail in the other, thus the two similar ideas become syncretized.

The evidence suggests that the explanations published with the facsimiles have two functions that are present at the same time: 1) most of the explanations appear to be Joseph Smith syncretizing a detail in the story of Abraham to a “representative” figure in the vignette, and 2) some of the explanations are Joseph Smith telling his readers, assumedly through his claims to the power of God, the ancient Egyptian (and Hebrew parallel) symbolic meaning of a few of the figures which provides his basis for the syncretism. Because Joseph Smith uses both kinds of explanations, it can sometimes be difficult to tell which he is employing. The best approach is simply to take cues from Joseph Smith himself. When his explanation explicitly declares that this is what the ancient Egyptians thought about or called one of the details in the vignette, then he is supposing his readers will recognize that he is claiming to use his

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid., 703.

71. Ibid., insert.

powers as a seer, as defined in the Book of Mormon, to “know of things which has [sic] past” (Mosiah 8:17). Only these specific instances are fair game for scholars to inspect the plausibility of his claims in the field of ancient studies generally and Egyptology specifically.

However, these specific instances do not require the reader to view *every* explanation as conveying original Egyptian thought, as most have assumed. For example, to say that Joseph Smith’s identification of Osiris as Abraham in both Facsimile #1 and #3 is wrong because that is not what the text labels in the vignettes or Egyptian religion in general says about the figure is a strawman argument, because Joseph Smith actually never specifically claimed that the Egyptians, or Egyptian religion in general, identified this character as Abraham. Only Joseph Smith himself identified the character as Abraham, but he does not tell us why he does. Consequently, that he could be simply reinterpreting the figure based on some perceived relationship he sees is just as plausible as claiming he erroneously identified what the ancient Egyptian meant this to be. It is important to note in this regard that when the explanations connect a detail from the Book of Abraham to a figure in the facsimiles, the explanations either simply label the figure with the Abrahamic detail or says that the figure “represents” a detail in the Abraham story. But in those instances when Joseph Smith specifically says this is what the Egyptian thought or said about the figure, his explanation never reflects a detail that is specific to Abraham.

Once these distinctions and boundaries of the evidence are clear, scholars are free to explore whether or not any of the connections Joseph Smith made has precedence. Ancient Egyptians, ancient Jews, ancient Christians, and others have syncretized Abrahamic traditions to the Egyptian religion in their day which seem to have interesting parallels to some of the connections that Joseph Smith made between the facsimiles and the Abrahamic tradition in his day.⁷² But finding such parallels does not mean necessarily that Joseph Smith restored an ancient Egyptian, Jewish, or Christian view of these specific vignettes. All it means is that Joseph Smith made a connection between the Book of Abraham text and the Egyptian vignettes because he discerned some relationship between the two, and it just so happens that others in antiquity had made similar connections between these two ancient traditions as well.

72. See Pearl of Great Price Central (website), <https://www.pearlofgreatpricecentral.org>, for examples.

In a few instances as noted above, Joseph Smith not only states what the meaning of a figure in the Egyptian context might be, but he also states that it has corollary meaning or is “answering to” a Hebrew word or idea, suggesting that the Prophet was not really focused on recovering Egyptian religion specifically. Rather his focus appears to be recuperating broader, though ancient, symbolic ideas that he believes the Egyptian figures might convey.

That recovering the Egyptians’ religion specifically does not appear to be his main purpose with the vignettes is supported by the fact that he does not actually attempt to translate any of the ancient Egyptian texts in the vignettes. Why would he skip actually translating (whether in the traditional view of that word or in Givens’ view) the texts in the vignettes that he spent so much time explaining if he thought they all pertained to Abraham? Might it be that Joseph Smith did not believe that the finer details of the Egyptian culture that these texts would likely contain was his purpose?

With respect to the texts in Facsimile #2, Joseph Smith’s explanations simply say “Contains writings that cannot now be revealed unto the world; but is to be had in the Holy Temple of God;” “Ought not to be revealed at the present time;” “will be given in the own due time of the Lord;” however, “if the world can find out these numbers, so let it be. Amen.”⁷³ Based on these descriptions, Joseph Smith seems content to just let the world figure out the actual meaning of these Egyptian texts, he sees no reason in making them known for his present purpose.

Contrary to Givens’ assertion, Joseph Smith does not actually translate any of the text in Facsimile #3 either. For example, he interprets Fig. 5 as “Shulem, one of the king’s principal waiters, as *represented by* the characters above his hand,” but Joseph Smith does not actually tell us what the characters say, only that they are representative.⁷⁴

73. “Book of Abraham and Facsimiles, 1 March-16 May 1842,” p. 784.

74. Ibid. To be consistent with his general use of the vignettes, it is reasonable to believe that Joseph Smith may have simply viewed the Shulem of Abraham’s day as symbolically “represented by” both the character and its caption in Facsimile #3, not that the Egyptians themselves would call this figure Shulem. Similarly, Joseph Smith indicates that the name for the figure that he reinterprets as Pharaoh is “given in the characters above the head” but does not actually translate the text above the head. Notably, there actually is a name given above the head, and the name and character in this moment is Isis who indeed does symbolically “represent” pharaoh in the ancient Egyptian religion. She represents the pharaoh so deeply that her name actually means and is spelled with the hieroglyph for the seat or throne of pharaoh.

Since the texts in the facsimiles were mostly ignored, restoring any voids in the fragments with text from another fragment and even placed upside down in the published version, would likely not have mattered to Joseph Smith. What these texts might actually say appears to be of little concern to him. He does, however, make one off-handed remark that the temple is the framework for truly understanding them, and this has certainly proven to be true in the field of Egyptology.

Indeed, as the original ancient setting of these facsimiles relative to Egyptian temple and tomb theology is better understood, Joseph Smith's use of them to "represent" the life of Abraham becomes more plausible, because the life of Abraham itself arguably follows a temple initiation progression.⁷⁵ In fact, Joseph Smith connected Abraham's binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 to the moment when Abraham was initiated into the highest order of the priesthood through the oath of God, providing an explicit temple context to Abraham's life story.⁷⁶ The Prophet may have viewed the flow of Abraham's entire narrative through the lens of a temple progression and so adopted and ordered the facsimiles to reflect that. An altar scene (Facs. #1), a cosmic scene (Facs. #2), and a throne scene (Facs. #3) follow the general flow and symbolic purposes of 1)

75. John S. Thompson, "The Story Cycles of the Patriarchs and Temple Progression" (2016 Temple on Mount Zion Conference, November 5, 2016, Provo, UT), https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=12&v=MAfApISOUM0&feature=emb_logo. Abraham's near-sacrifice in his younger years can relate to initial sacrifices at temple courtyard altars, Abraham's covenant and vision of the heavens/Creation relate to the expanded sight entering temples proper give, and the Abrahamic trials and sacrifice of Isaac lead to the oath of God and covenant blessings being made sure as indicative of temple throne rooms in the holy of holies. See also Hugh W. Nibley, "The Three Facsimiles from the Book of Abraham" (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1980) and "Abraham's Temple Drama," *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 17:445-82.

76. "That of Melchisedec who had still greater power even power of an endless life of which was our Lord Jesus Christ which also Abraham obtained by the offering of his son Isaac which was not the power of a Prophet nor apostle nor Patriarch only but of King & Priest" in Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith* (Grandin Book, 1991), 245 (Franklin D. Richards notes of August 27, 1843 sermon); John S. Thompson, "The Sacrifice of Isaac: Abraham's Initiation into the Highest Order of the Priesthood," *Genesis 22: Latter-day Saint Perspectives on the Binding of Isaac* (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and the Religious Studies Center Conference, Brigham Young University, March 2004).

courtyard altars, 2) holy places or hypostyle halls, and 3) holy of holies or sanctuaries in both Israelite and Egyptian temples.⁷⁷

The point here is that in spite of Joseph Smith’s overall use of the facsimiles as “representative,” this is no mere bricolage with a lack of consideration for original meaning or context as the term suggests. Joseph Smith explicitly provides, as noted above, what the ancient Egyptian’s thought about a few of the figures, and he also appears to draw connections between the figures and the story of Abraham based on ancient symbolism he perceives in both traditions that allow for a syncretism to occur. Both seem more like efforts to restore the “ancient order of things,” not create a modern bricolage.⁷⁸

Production of the Text

Beyond the facsimiles, Givens goes much further with this term and suggests to his readers that the entire Book of Abraham text can be viewed as bricolage as well. He admits that this amounts to calling the Book of Abraham a modern pseudepigrapha as David Bokovoy has done. In other words, the Book of Abraham is a modern, thus fictional, creation of Joseph Smith’s own mind, and “falsely attributed” to Abraham.

Since Mormon Studies advocates are required to view all of Joseph Smith’s “revelations” and “translations” as the inspiration and creativity of his own mind, bricolage would not be an inappropriate metaphor for them to adopt. As noted earlier, Givens believes that bricolage “was the very basis of [Joseph Smith’s] methodology of Restoration.”

The appeal of this idea is that it resonates somewhat with Latter-day Saints’ experiences with personal revelation generally. Studying out a problem in their own minds and coming to a conclusion based on that study coupled with quiet feeling, roughly speaking. However, to assume that Joseph Smith’s revealed “translations” are mostly the product of his

77. On the similarities between Israelite and Egyptian temple progression see “The Context of Old Testament Temple Worship: Early Ancient Egyptian Rites” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, eds. David R. Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, UT and Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University’s Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2013), <https://rsc.byu.edu/ascending-mountain-lord/context-old-testament-temple-worship-early-ancient-egyptian-rites>.

78. “And now as the great purposes of God are hastening to their accomplishment and the things spoken of in the prophets are fulfilling, as the kingdom of God is established on the earth, and the ancient order of things restored, the Lord has manifested to us this duty and privilege, ... ” (Joseph Smith, “Baptism for the Dead,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (15 April 1842): 761.

own creative mind and inspiration, limited by his own actual knowledge and abilities, is to deny the uniqueness of his gifts and the miraculous role that Joseph Smith plays in the Latter-day Saint community. For them, he is not just a prophet, but a seer. And in the Latter-day Saint community a seer

is greater than a prophet ... a seer is a revelator and a prophet also; and a gift which is greater can no man have, except he should possess the power of God, which no man can; yet a man may have great power given him from God. But a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known. Thus God has provided a means that man, through faith, might work mighty miracles; therefore he becometh a great benefit to his fellow beings.⁷⁹

Such powers enter the realm of miraculous and go beyond personal inspiration and creative genius that is tempered by one's own natural ability, knowledge, language, and thought processes.

Givens suggests to his readers that the Book of Abraham might be better viewed as a product of something similar to personal inspiration, wherein Joseph Smith pondered over the ancient Egyptian papyri but formulated in his own mind some kind of response that was filled with creativity and divine truth, rather than miraculously translating an actual ancient writing by the power of God as he claimed.⁸⁰ Contrary to actual scriptural definitions,

79. "Book of Mormon, 1830," p. 173, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830/179>, [Mosiah 8:15-18].

80. This is not to say that Joseph Smith did not himself often engage in regular personal revelatory experiences. He certainly noticed things in his environment, pondered their truth and considered their purpose, and made daily decisions based upon his impressions and inspiration. However, Joseph Smith did not claim that he was solely recreating or repurposing noticed fragments into a new movement, born uniquely of his own mind and experience, but he and his followers thought he was actually restoring ancient truths that had their own pedigree and an ancient context in which they were born. They believed these ancient truths were revealed to him in miraculous ways, somewhat different than the day to day inspirations needed for life or for the Church. Joseph certainly had to fit his recovered antiquities into the present construction he was revealing through a process of trial and error and daily

Givens confounds the title “seer” to mean “writer of pseudepigrapha” and asserts that the “very basis” of Joseph Smith’s methodology for “restoring” truth is not actually restoring, but creating bricolage.

III. Modern Translation Theory

Givens discusses briefly some standard modern translation theory, which states essentially that no one can truly translate the full intended meaning of one language (with all the unique cultural and personal context that goes into it) into another with its own different set of cultural and personal norms. Since every word has been immersed in a cultural context, theoretically it takes one submerged in that same context to understand all the nuances of the word. Consequently, the translator must engage in a kind of construction that goes beyond the strict words and syntax of the text she is translating and coerces either the sender closer to the receiver’s mode of thinking or the receiver closer to the sender’s.

And for Smith, that meant not [bringing God closer to the reader,] defamiliarizing the wonderful or domesticating the sacred but leading the reader into new modes of perception and comprehension that would enable an initiation into eternal realms and perspectives. In practice, this could entail something as simple as the implementation of a diction borrowed from sacred discourse (the King James Version) or as complicated as reconstituting a source document [the Egyptian Book of Breathings] into an inspired and inspiring temple text [the Book of Abraham], of which the original would then appear as a pale reflection.⁸¹

inspiration, but the foundational truths seemed to come to him in ways beyond his own natural ability and thoughts. For example, a Mormon Studies scholar might be interested in women’s benevolent societies of the nineteenth century and how these were an inspiration for Joseph Smith’s creation of the Female Relief Society; however, Joseph Smith apparently taught that this organization was a restoration of an ancient order that existed in the primitive church: “Although the name may be of modern date, the institution is of ancient origin. We were told by our martyred prophet that the same organization existed in the church anciently” (Eliza R. Snow, “Female Relief Society,” *Deseret News*, Apr. 22, 1868, 1; punctuation standardized). So is the Women’s Relief Society bricolage, a purely modern creation based on a response to modern benevolent societies, or is it a restoration of an ancient order? Those who study antiquities are in a far better position to answer that question, but an inquiry into any claims of recovered antiquity by Joseph Smith is taboo these days and ignored as “apologetic.”

81. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 196.

While modern translation theory acknowledges the difficulties in conveying the ideas of one civilization into another, Givens takes this to an extreme by suggesting that Joseph Smith is not merely attempting to traverse the cultural, linguistic barrier between an ancient and modern language, but he is attempting to “translate” across the huge cultural divide between the masses and God. Consequently, Joseph Smith’s “translations” bridge such a vast differential that the original is likely to be a “pale reflection” of the actual product. In other words, the Book of Abraham is a pale reflection of the Book of Breathing text and the illustrations, because it is not really an attempt to translate any mundane words on an actual ancient text into mundane English, but rather he is attempting to “translate” the masses themselves into higher or divine modes of thinking, bringing the reader into the cultural context of God. Thus the produced text is so much higher than its supposed source that it is hard for mortals to see the connection.

This is very eloquent, but such a theory disconnects the Book of Abraham from reality so much as to render any discussion of its relationship to the papyri, the ancient world, or pretty much anything rather pointless. More importantly, it is contrary to Joseph Smith’s own revelations which state that God is more than willing to condescend to the more plainer languages and modes of thinking of the masses to help them understand his truths:

For my soul delighteth in plainness: for after this manner doth the Lord God work among the children of men. For the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding: for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding.⁸²

And then shall ye know that I have seen Jesus, and that he hath talked with me face to face, and that he told me in plain humility, even as a man telleth another in mine own language, concerning these things.⁸³

“Behold I am God & have spoken it these are commandments are of me & were given unto my Servents in their weakness after the manner of their Language that they might come to understanding.”⁸⁴

82. “Book of Mormon, 1830,” p. 118, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, [2 Nephi 31:3].

83. *Ibid.*, 565 [Ether 12:39].

84. “Revelation, 1 November 1831-B [D&C 1],” p. 126, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-1-november-1831-b-dc-1/2>, [D&C 1:24].

Earlier in his chapter, Givens assumes, based on the work of Samuel Brown and others, that Joseph Smith was on a quest to recover the actual language that Adam spoke, for such, ostensibly, would allow the conveyance of ideas between God and the masses with no friction of misunderstanding. Recovering this ancient spoken language was part of Joseph Smith's Restoration, Givens asserts, and his efforts to learn Hebrew and Greek, and presumably Egyptian, got him closer to that original language.⁸⁵

While some sort of “pure language” project does appear in Joseph Smith's contemporary orbit, assuming that it was part of the Prophet's spiritual mission is mostly conjecture. The pure language project is more likely William Phelps', and though Joseph Smith gets entangled from time to time, there is no explicit statement from him or anyone else that recovering the actual dialect of Adam was part of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁸⁶

Givens references Moses 6:5–7 as evidence that it was:

And a book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration; And by them their children were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled. Now this same Priesthood, which was in the beginning, shall be in the end of the world also.

He asserts that these verses “significantly but cryptically” refer to the language of Adam as “Priesthood”⁸⁷ (which on the surface appears plausible given the vague structure of the English) and since the text claims that this priesthood “which was in the beginning, shall be in the end of the world also,” then this means that the Adamic language, which

85. Samuel Brown, “Joseph (Smith) in Egypt: Babel, Hieroglyphs, and the Pure Language of Eden,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 78, no. 1 (Mar. 2009): 26-65; is a standard on this view, but it is also so full of unproven assertions as to require a separate review.

86. For the latest effort to connect Joseph Smith to this see David Golding, “‘Eternal Wisdom Engraven Upon the Heavens’: Joseph Smith's Pure Language Project” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, eds. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 331-62.

87. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 113.

was in the beginning, shall be in the end of the world also. Scripturally then, recovering Adam's dialect is part of the Restoration.

While Givens' reading of Moses 6 is plausible, a more contextually sensitive reading recommends that it is not likely. It is more probable that "priesthood" here is referring to the lineage of priesthood bearers mentioned in these verses and the verses immediately preceding:

And then began these <3/> men to call upon the name of the Lord; And the Lord blessed them; And a Book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded in the language of Adam. For it was given unto as many as called upon God, to write with <by> the finger <spirit> of inspiration; And by them their children were taught to read & write, Having a language which was pure & undefiled. </> <4 <1/> Now this <same which presthood which> was in the begining, which shall be in the <continue> end of the world <als>. ⁸⁸

In other words, the priesthood lineage of these men who "call upon the name of the Lord" and their children, whom they taught, will be in the end of the world also.

That the priesthood is a promised lineage of children or seed whom God would "call upon" until the end of the earth is highlighted later in this text when God speaks an "unalterable decree" to Enoch:

the Lord could not withhold and he covenanted with Noah⁸⁹ and swore unto him with an oath that he would stay the floods that he would call upon the children of Noah and he sent fourth an unaltarable decree tha[t] a remnent of his seed should always be found among all nations while the earth should stand.⁹⁰

This is made most clear in the Book of Abraham wherein the text explicitly calls Abraham's seed "priesthood":

and in thee ~~and in~~ (that is in thy priesthood.) and in thy seed, (that is thy pristhood) for I give unto the[e] a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee, (that

88. "Old Testament Revision 2," p. 14, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-2/18>. The later published phrase this "same priesthood which" does not appear in "Old Testament Revision 1," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/1>; nor originally in this version but was added here as a superscript presumably to provide some clarity.

89. Corrected to "Enock" in "Old Testament Revision 2", 23.

90. "Old Testament Revision 1," 18.

is to say thy literal seed, or the seed of thy body,) shall all the families of the earth be blessed.⁹¹

God's oath assured Enoch and Noah that their priesthood bearing seed would continue so the earth would never be flooded again, and the token of God's promise was the rainbow. John the Revelator's twenty-four elders in a continuous circle around the throne of God in the midst of a rainbow that also encircled the throne is the New Testament's echo of this same unalterable decree.⁹² In other words, the circle-shaped rainbow is equated to the continuous priesthood seed (the circle of elders around God's throne) that God would call and ensure that they administer the gospel among all nations to the end of the world so that a flood would not occur again.

A modern revelation of Joseph Smith's also references this understanding of a promised seed being the priesthood that would be found in the end of the world:

Therefore thus saith the Lord unto you with whom the priesthood hath continued through the lineage of your fathers: For ye are lawful heirs according to the flesh & have been hid from the world, with Christ in God. Therefore your life & the priesthood hath remained & must needs remain through you & your lineage untill the reiteration of all things, spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets since the world began.⁹³

In some of his personal teachings, Joseph Smith himself spoke of this unalterable decree or promise that a remnant of the priesthood seed would always continue:

Zachariah having no children, knew that the promise of God must fail, consequently he went into the Temple to wrestle with God according to the order of the priesthood to obtain a promise of a son, and when the Angel told him that his promise was granted he because of unbelief was struck dumb.⁹⁴

91. "Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July-circa November 1835-C [Abraham 1:1-2:18]," p. 8, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-manuscript-circa-july-circa-november-1835-c-abraham-11-218/8>, [Abraham 2:11].

92. See Revelation 4:2-4.

93. "Revelation Book 1," p. 177, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/165,177> [D&C 86:8-10].

94. Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, eds. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 196, <https://rsc.byu.edu/words-joseph-smith/23-july-1843-sunday-afternoon>.

The election of the promised seed still continues, and in the last days, they shall have the priesthood restored unto them, and they shall be the “Saviors on mount Zion” the “ministers of our God,” if it were not for the remnant which was left, then might we be as Sodom and as Gomorah.⁹⁵

Reading “priesthood” in the Book of Moses passage as a covenant seed or lineage that will be in the end of the world also is more fully supported in the teachings and revelations of Joseph Smith than Givens’ proposal that the Adamic language will be in the end of the world also. There is simply nothing that explicitly demonstrates Joseph Smith believed or taught that recovering the Adamic language was part of his spiritual mission. To assert that he did is to engage in a kind of modern cultural parallelomania, wherein scholars see some ideas in the culture surrounding Joseph Smith (like “pure language” quests) that may have some broad points of connection to his revelations but then making logical leaps and assumptions that everything is the same without any real explicit evidence to back up such claims. While parallelomania is often a concern among those who study antiquity, Americanists in Mormon Studies generally would do well to learn to avoid similar trappings when things look similar between Joseph Smith’s doings and his greater American context. The details are often more complicated than the simple assertions that he borrowed (or plagiarized) something from his environment.

Likewise, the role of language in the Restoration is a little more complicated than the simple assertion that Joseph Smith was swept up in common quests for pure language in his day. Language is certainly a medium through which the priesthood Joseph Smith restored operates. Priesthood and language are closely linked, but not necessarily in the way Givens asserts. The revelations of Joseph Smith do not claim that Adam’s actual dialect, pronunciation and syntax, was the operative power and means by which God and the masses could best communicate. The verses in Moses discussed above suggest that the pure and undefiled language of Adam, recorded in the Book of Remembrance, was to “write by the spirit of inspiration.” Speaking words that are filled with the spirit of truth, regardless of whether the words formed are in Hebrew, English, Chinese, Arabic, or Adam’s actual spoken dialect, is a central teaching of Joseph Smith’s revelations and is, thus, more likely the meaning of “pure language”:

95. “Discourse, 16 May 1841, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*,” p. 430, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16may-1841-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/2>.

Do ye not remember that I said unto you, that after ye had received the Holy Ghost, ye could speak with the tongue of Angels? And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of Angels, save it were by the Holy Ghost? Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ. — Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ. (2 Nephi 32:2–3)

The thrust of these verses from the Book of Mormon is that speaking the words of Christ with the power of the Holy Ghost is what constitutes angelic language, not the recovering of some ancient dialect that has power only when tongue and mouth are shaped just right to make the right sounds, and not the recovering of some actual angel-ese.

An earlier passage in the Book of Mormon indicates that the words of the Jews in a book went forth from the apostles to the Gentiles “in purity.” This was not a reference to their having recovered the Adamic language, rather, the book was pure because it “contained the plainness of the Gospel of the Lord, of whom the twelve apostles bear record; and they bear record according to the truth which is in the Lamb of God.”⁹⁶ It was the fullness of truth that made their words pure, even though their records were likely of multiple languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Eventually, however, the words were perverted because the Gentiles removed some things plain and precious.

The notion of ancient magical or hidden words certainly exists in the world’s traditions and modern fantasies, with their quests to discover and use such words to open secret doors, transform objects, or affect other change. While such traditions and fantasies can be interesting, and captured the attention of Latter-day Saints from Joseph Smith’s day to the present, due to the echoes of truth they contain, care should be taken not to assert that Joseph Smith made questing for the original primeval dialect central to the Restoration without real explicit evidence. To do so is to conflate the real with the counterfeit. While Joseph Smith certainly lamented about the inherent weakness in the spoken languages of today, as one might do about any weakness of mortality, the revelations of Joseph Smith indicate that such can be overcome with the Holy Ghost, not by recovering some lost ancient language. Joseph Smith’s revelations assert that it is through the medium of the Holy Ghost that God and the masses can communicate now and be edified and understand one

96. “Book of Mormon, 1830,” p. 30, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, [1 Nephi 13:24-25]. “Plainness” was changed to “fulness” in subsequent versions.

another, no Adamic dialect or complex view of “translation” is necessary. It is the Holy Ghost that can take any mortal language, as also any mortal body, and make it pure and undefiled. It is the spirit-infused words of truth that are the true “language of Adam.”

Therefore, why is it that ye cannot understand and know that he that receiveth the word by the spirit of truth, receiveth it as it is preached by the spirit of truth, wherefore he that preacheth and he that receiveth understandeth one another and both are edified and rejoice together.⁹⁷

IV. “Authoritative” Writing

Givens argues that the sudden onslaught of a variety of literature and merging of genres leading up to Joseph Smith’s world created a climate where

rampant destabilization of narrative authority had a relevant, if indirect, bearing on matters of translation. For this destabilization historicized and complicated the question of who was speaking, with what authority, and how the answers to these questions were to be known ... As a result, many of the era’s works grounded their appeal to authority in ways that today would be seen as dishonest, irresponsible, implausible, and self-contradictory. In this new world, authentic sentiment and moral fervor, not credentials or documentary evidence, became the supreme ground of moral authority.⁹⁸

In such a climate, titles including “memoirs” or “autobiography” or content that included copies of “sworn affidavits” could all be purely fictional but still carry the weight of “truth” or moral authority. In other words, Joseph Smith’s environment was a place and time where “authorship and authority acquire new and contradictory meanings.”⁹⁹

How Givens relates this to the translation of the Book of Abraham is not explicitly stated. But having explored the ideas that Joseph Smith may have thought he was “translating” the Book of Abraham from characters on the Book of Breathing, that the EA and GAEL appear to

97. “Revelations printed in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832-June 1833,” p. [1], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelations-printed-in-the-evening-and-the-morning-star-june-1832-june-1833/6>, [D&C 50:17-22].

98. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 4392 of 6929.

99. *Ibid.*, loc. 4465 of 6929.

reveal his methodology, and that the papyri likely served as a catalyst for Joseph Smith to create, from his own imagination, a pseudepigraphal work having no real relationship to Abraham, Givens needs to explore what to do with Joseph Smith's actual claim that he was revealing an ancient text written by Abraham. The thrust of this final subsection of his chapter seems to suggest that although the Prophet's actual claims and efforts appear to be factually incorrect, having no basis in historical or scholarly reality, they might still be considered genuine in his day. Since fictional memoirs and affidavits in 19th century dime novels were used as actual evidence in courts of law (as Givens highlights), then certainly it would have been culturally acceptable for Joseph Smith to present the Book of Abraham as "authentic" in his day, even if it wasn't.

Even if "authentic sentiment and moral fervor, not credentials or documentary evidence" was acceptable to some in Joseph Smith's day, the reader should not suppose that such was acceptable to Joseph Smith. One need merely look to the great extent to which the Prophet credentialed and documented everything to recognize that a factual basis and real evidence for his claims, not mere sentiment or fervor, were important to him. He obtained three, and then eight more, official witnesses of the golden plates from which he translated the Book of Mormon,¹⁰⁰ sought or obtained scholarly certification for his Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham characters and translations,¹⁰¹ claimed to receive angelic restorations of both the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods and various keys in the presence of another witness,¹⁰² told the newly minted Church in its first revelation "Behold there Shall a Record be kept among you" and employed countless scribes to keep records,¹⁰³ received the vision of heaven and hell with another witness in the vision with him while others watched and heard them speaking what they saw,¹⁰⁴ established a whole religious system

100. "Book of Mormon, 1830," p. 589-90, *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

101. "History, 1838-1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805-30 August 1834]," 9; "Certificate from Michael Chandler, 6 July 1835," p. [72], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/certificate-from-michael-chandler-6-july-1835/1>.

102. "Appendix 5, Document 6. Blessing to Oliver Cowdery, 2 October 1835," p. 12, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-5-document-6-blessing-to-oliver-cowdery-2-october-1835/1>; Smith, "Journal, 1835-1836," 191-92.

103. "Revelation Book 1," 28, [D&C 21:1].

104. "Vision, 16 February 1832 [D&C 76]," p. 1, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/vision-16-february-1832-dc-76/1>, [D&C 76].

based on covenant/contract relationship and teaching the importance of keeping actual records of such covenants, for such records would be used in the final judgment.¹⁰⁵

The first sermon Joseph Smith gave to the newly formed Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is a strong witness of his desires to keep records and witness everything, so that all things have a basis in documented, recorded fact for the benefit of the Church and the whole world:

I have something to lay before this council, an item which they will find to be of great importance to them. I have for myself learned — a fact by experience which on reflection gives me deep sorrow. It is a truth that if I now had in my possession every decision which has been given had upon important items of doctrine and duties since the rise of this church, they would be of incalculable worth to the saints, but we have neglected to keep records of such things, thinking that perhaps that they would never benefit us afterwards, wh[i]ch had we now, would decide almost any point that might be agitated; and now we cannot bear record to the church nor unto the world of the great and glorious manifestations that have been made to us with that degree of power and authority wh[i]ch we otherwise could if we had those decisions to publish abroad.

Since the twelve are now chosen, I wish to tell them a course which they may pursue and be benefitted hereafter in a point of light of which they, perhaps, are not now aware. At all times when you assemble in the capacity of a council to transact business let the oldest of your number preside, and let one or more be appointed to keep a record of your proceedings, and on the decision of every important item, be it what it may, let such decision be noted down, and they will ever after remain upon record as law, covenant and doctrine ...

Here let me prophecy the time will come when if you neglect to do this, you will fall by the hands of unrighteous men. Were you to be brought before the authorities and accused of any crime or misdemeanor and be as innocent as the angels of God unless you can prove that you were somewhere else, your enemies will prevail against you: but if you can bring twelve

105. “Letter to the Church, 7 September 1842 [D&C 128],” p. 1, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-7-september-1842-dc-128/1>, [D&C 128].

men to testify that you were in some other place at that time you will escape their hands. Now if you will be careful to keep minutes of these things as I have said, it will be one of the most important and interesting records ever seen. I have now laid these things before you for your consideration and you are left to act according to your own judgments.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, the evidence is overwhelmingly against any idea that Joseph Smith merely let “authentic sentiment and moral fervor, not credentials or documentary evidence” become the basis for his moral authority.

In his closing remarks for this chapter on the Book of Abraham, Givens asserts that Joseph Smith never claimed the Book of Abraham was scripture, and he probably had no intention of canonizing it either:

“He [Joseph Smith] did not refer to this work as something he was called of God to do or as “a branch of his calling,” as was true of his other translations. Neither did he, as in those other cases, claim scriptural status for the resulting product. Canonization was never likely in his conceiving, either.”¹⁰⁷

Givens does not elaborate on his sweeping declarations, for they are merely a side note as he wraps up his chapter, and it is not fully clear what he means by “scriptural status” and “canonization” or how those terms would have been understood in Joseph Smith’s day; however, the Prophet certainly claimed the Book of Abraham was the writing of an ancient patriarch and recognized servant of God. While that is not formal canonization, is it a claim to scriptural status? Probably.

Fortunately, Joseph Smith provided more explicit insight into how he regarded the Book of Abraham when he prepared a forward for its publication. This forward was never published, but it provides an appropriate response to Givens’ assertion:

In future. I design to furnish much original matter, which will be found of enestimable adventage to the saints, — & to all who — desire a knowledge of the kingdom of God. — and as it is not practicable to bring forthe the new translation. of the Scriptures. & varioes records of ancint date. & great worth to this gen[e]ration in ~~book~~ <the usual> form. by books. I shall prenit [print] specimens of the same in the Times & Seasons

106. “Record of the Twelve, 14 February-28 August 1835,” p. 1, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/record-of-the-twelve-14-february-28-august-1835/7>.

107. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 201.

as fast. as time & space will admit. so that the honest in heart may be cheerd & comforted and go on their way rejoic[ing]. — as their souls become exp[an]ded. — & their undestandig [understanding] enlightend, by a knowledg of what Gods work through the fathers. in former days, as well as what He is about to do in Latter Days — To fulfil the words of the fathers.¹⁰⁸

It appears that the Prophet would rather have published the Book of Abraham, along with the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible and other records in the “usual form” of “books,” but it was not practical in the moment. He speaks of them all as providing “a knowledge of the kingdom of God” and being of “great worth,” soul expanding, and enlightening, because they are “Gods work through the fathers. in former days.” Additionally, God’s work includes fulfilling the words of these ancients in the “Latter Days.” If this does not indicate that the Book of Abraham had the status of scripture in Joseph Smith’s mind, then Givens will need to be more specific about what does.

Although Joseph Smith did have members formally bind themselves to the Bible and Book of Mormon on the day the Church was organized on April 6, 1830 as a form of institutional or communal canonization, it is difficult to tell what his intentions were with the Book of Abraham since he never finished publishing the project. But mentioning that he would have published it with the other forthcoming records in the “usual” form of books can suggest he anticipated a day when it was part of the standard works of the Church.

Conclusions

In order to fully engage the academy, historians and theologians in the field of Mormon Studies, like Givens, must write under the premise that Joseph Smith’s revelations reflect his own natural understanding, creativity, and development. The Book of Mormon and Bible expansions, for example, can only be indicative of the Prophet’s own 1829–1831 theological understanding and culture (the time period when he produced these texts) and thus are to be examined and interpreted within that specific period to ascertain meaning. The idea that some of Joseph Smith’s revelations might actually be, as he claimed, divinely-aided translations of records from ancient prophets who may have had a more complex

108. “Editorial, circa 1 March 1842, Draft,” p. [1], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/editorial-circa-1-march-1842-draft/1>. Thanks to Stephen Smoot and Matthew Roper for this reference.

theology than his own, or that his revelations might actually be, as he claimed, the words of a divine being whose ways and thoughts are higher than his own are not admissible. To work within any of these parameters is deemed “apologetic,” and it is currently trendy to simply dismiss or ignore such approaches, even among scholars within the Church.

While some good may come from Mormon Studies and its natural evolutionary approach to Church history and theology — from “bracketing faith” and gaining admittance thereby to the world’s dialogue concerning the Church and its members, to discussing the Book of Mormon or Book of Abraham only within their own internal limits or within the cultural environments of Joseph Smith’s day, or interpreting all of Joseph Smith’s revelations within their immediate religious, political, or social context — we must put a bright spotlight on some problematic outcomes that naturally follow such methodologies when they begin to be embraced within the Latter-day Saint faith community.

If Joseph Smith’s revelations do indeed include translations of ancient sources or the thoughts of higher being, as he claimed, then strictly interpreting these revelations in the modern religious contexts of Joseph Smith’s natural mind and environment as the Mormon Studies movement demands will lead to different conclusions about terminology and meaning compared to those who examine the translations in the context of their claimed antiquity. Priesthood orders and inheritance laws, for example, functioned differently in antiquity than in antebellum protestant America. Interpreting priesthood or inheritance passages of ancient texts within modern contexts is bound to distort the meaning of the words and potentially lead to false constructs about the nature and historical development of priesthood or inheritance, if they are indeed ancient.

In a natural and gradual way, Latter-day Saints examining Joseph Smith’s translations from a Mormon Studies perspective, in contrast to other approaches, such as ancient studies, will eventually define and understand the same words in the text so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling questions by an appeal to the sources. Like the Brother of Jared feared, we are arriving at a point where “we may not understand *our* words.”

This modern confounding became most clear to me several years ago when I submitted a paper for publication on priesthood development in the Church, which demonstrated that Joseph Smith’s teachings in Nauvoo concerning the highest order or fullness of the priesthood in relation to the temple — something that most Mormon Studies scholars assume is a late development in Joseph Smith’s priesthood theology

— already appear fully developed in the Book of Mormon, Bible expansions, and other early revelations of Joseph Smith. One reviewer scoffed at such a possibility:

There is no timeline or sense of historical development. It appears that Smith’s ministry is caught within a time warp where the 1829 BoM is comparable to and possibly addressing an 1843 speech of Smith. Current terminology is applied and used so clumsily that seemingly clever BoM analysis is left fruitless and unconvincing. By the end terms like Holy Order are synonymous to other orders and new terminology like Fullness of the priesthood are never differentiated from the previous idea of Melchizedek priesthood.¹⁰⁹

This reviewer clearly believes, or at least works from the premise, that the Book of Mormon must reflect an earlier less-developed theology of Joseph Smith’s 1829 mind concerning priesthood that is fundamentally different from Joseph Smith’s “new terminology” and complexity of his later periods. This is a tacit rejection of the possibility that the Book of Mormon might already contain a more fully developed priesthood and temple theology and terminology of an ancient people that might actually reflect Joseph Smith’s later teachings concerning priesthood and temple in Nauvoo. The natural explanations that Mormon Studies demands will undoubtedly create a version of priesthood development and terminology that is fundamentally different from those who allow the revelations and translations of Joseph Smith to have more complex ancient ideas, independent from or above his own. These fundamental differences in premise are preventing us from understanding one another.

Elder Jeffrey Holland’s remarks to the Maxwell Institute, where Terryl Givens is currently a Fellow, are appropriate here:

In the spirit of full disclosure, you should know that initially I was against any proposal to do at BYU what was called *Mormon studies* elsewhere because I knew what Mormon studies elsewhere usually meant. However, over time I have come to see merit in a Latter-day Saint studies effort at BYU *if you are willing to make it significantly different from the present* “Bracketing your faith” is what those in the field call it. ... On this I stand with Levenson and Stephen Prothero, who has recently become a friend. Stephen said fifteen years ago

109. Anonymous email communication sent to author, June 7, 2017; as standard feedback.

that bracketing one's personal faith, its truth claims, and moral judgments has cost scholars credibility with readers because, as he says, no one knows exactly where authors are coming from ideologically. Elder Maxwell was more direct. He said that we are not really "learned" if we exclude the body of divine data that the eternities place at our disposal through revelation and the prophets of God. He also said, "The highest education, therefore, includes salvational truths," thus the invitation to include in your scholarly backpack the body of "divine data" that the eternities have placed at our disposal. We are to use salvational truths whenever and wherever we can.¹¹⁰

Givens began his complicating of the term "translate" by reminding his readers that the "Book of Mormon Wars" — i.e., scholarly debate concerning the possible authenticity of that book as an ancient record — has been superseded by scholarship which ignores questions of historicity and focuses more on internal textual analysis and its impact on individuals, communities, and cultures since its publication. Givens suggests that scholarship concerning the Book of Abraham, with its controversial claims to antiquity, might benefit from a similar transformation:

Evaluating [Joseph Smith's] production in the light of modern Egyptological expertise may tell us something about his linguistic abilities — or lack thereof; it will reveal nothing about the religious world out of which the Book of Abraham came or the mind that rendered it in ways that came to profoundly shape the religious values and precepts of an entire people.¹¹¹

Indeed, Givens points out that Joseph Smith's supposed attempt to translate a Book of Abraham from an ancient Egyptian Book of Breathings has a silver lining, because one can now view the Book of Abraham as a modern imaginative or creative work made within the Prophet's own inspired mind, rather than an English translation of an actual ancient text, and such a view

brackets the questions of historicity and accuracy altogether and enables a new range of questions to emerge. Instead of evaluating

110. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century," *BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Annual Report 2018* (lecture, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, November 10, 2018), 15-17, <https://byumiuploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2019/06/2018-Maxwell-Institute-Annual-Report-small.pdf>.

111. Givens with Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, loc. 4067 of 6929.

Smith's work by looking back through the lens of contemporary Egyptology, we may learn the workings of Smith's prophetic imagination and his own unique cultural moment by entering more fully into his nineteenth-century context.¹¹²

This last quote needs a little more context and clarification as it is contributing to some confounding in the moment.

Just prior to this quote, Givens discusses the Church's Gospel Topics essay on the "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham" and claims that it admits Joseph Smith may have mistakenly thought he was translating the Book of Abraham text from the Book of Breathing characters while, at the same time, it catalyzed a story about Abraham in Joseph Smith's mind: "the church now acknowledges on its website that prophetic misunderstanding and prophetic inspiration may coexist in the same person even at the same moment."¹¹³

However, the Church essay, though a little ambiguous, does not actually state this. The part of the essay in question, quoted by Givens, says that "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."¹¹⁴ This statement does not state that Joseph Smith mistakenly thought he was translating the Book of Abraham from characters on the papyri that were not the Book of Abraham. It merely acknowledges a theory that suggests the Book of Abraham may have been given to Joseph Smith by direct revelation as he contemplated the papyri and its vignettes generally.

Most adherents of the "catalyst theory" suggest that if the Book of Abraham text was not on any of the papyri that Joseph Smith possessed, then maybe the papyri inspired the Prophet to miraculously perceive the actual ancient text of Abraham, which he revealed in English, similar to the Parchment of John which Joseph Smith never possessed physically but perceived and translated into English anyway as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 7. Consequently, this version of the catalyst theory still qualifies as a translation (an ancient text was rendered into

112. *Ibid.*, loc. 4049 of 6929.

113. *Ibid.*

114. "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (website), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>.

English, even if by the gift and power of God) and it does not “bracket the questions of historicity and accuracy altogether.” Since it assumes the Book of Abraham was a real ancient writing that the Prophet revealed in its English translation by the gift and power of God, applying ancient studies to test its historicity and explore its meaning is still fair game. While there are historical problems with this theory, given Joseph Smith’s and his contemporaries’ claims that he translated the Book of Abraham from characters on the papyri he possessed,¹¹⁵ nevertheless, adherents of this theory still assume the text is ancient.

In contrast, Givens’ version of the catalyst theory assumes that the papyri did not inspire an actual, though miraculous, English translation of an ancient writing of Abraham, but rather the papyri sparked a modern, uniquely created, story about Abraham in the inspired, imaginative mind of Joseph Smith himself. Of course, such a view does not just “bracket” questions of historicity and accuracy, it nullifies them, effectively canceling the “Book of Abraham Wars.” In this framework, anyone desiring to do Book of Abraham research can do so unhampered by Joseph Smith’s claims of its antiquity, “entering more fully into his nineteenth-century context,” just as many scholars have done with Book of Mormon.

While abandonment of the controversial elements surrounding the Book of Mormon (e.g., claims that it is a divinely enabled translation of an actual ancient record) has allowed for a flowering of Book of Mormon studies in the Mormon Studies movement generally, and the same could happen for the Book of Abraham as well, what is the cost for championing such efforts and downplaying the role and work of those who explore the antiquity of these records as Joseph Smith claimed?

It should be apparent that a narrowing of effort and marginalizing or bracketing the possible antiquity of the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham not only might confound the terminology of the text (as modern constructs are imposed on potentially ancient documents), but

115. To be clear, Joseph Smith did claim 1) that he was providing a “translation of some ancient records,” the “writings of Abraham,” “written by his [Abraham’s] own hand,” “Book of Abraham and Facsimiles, 1 March-16 May 1842,” p. 704 and 2) that he had learned specific things mentioned in the Book of Abraham “by translating the papyrus now in my house” (Smith, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 380). Noted in Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 923). Additionally, the Book of Abraham itself claims to be a first-person record written by Abraham, not a third person story from the mind of Joseph Smith: “I [Abraham] shall endeavor to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity that shall come after me” “Book of Abraham and Facsimiles, 1 March-16 May 1842,” p. 705 [Abraham 1:31]).

it may effectively silence any voices who may be “crying from the dust.” It negates any real authentic testimony of those who have seen, heard, felt, and written about Jesus Christ in antiquity. Further, it prevents any richness of meaning or greater understanding that can be gained from studying these texts in their claimed ancient provenance. If Latter-day Saint Americanists persist in hyper-contextualizing every revelation and translation of Joseph Smith into the 19th century, then the unique terminology and meaning any ancient records might hold will surely be distorted, and the miraculous claims of Joseph Smith must continue to be watered-down and explained away, as is becoming more prevalent. The plain language of the Latter-day Saint community will grow in complication until we can no longer understand our words.

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