

# Hard Questions in Church History

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## The Book of Abraham and The Mummies and Manuscripts

### Questions to Consider

- Why do the Joseph Smith Papyri from the Metropolitan Art Museum in New York City not match the text of the Book of Abraham?
- Did Joseph Smith translate the Book of Abraham from papyri that he had (but we don't), or did he simply receive a revelation from God and call it a translation of the Book of Abraham?

As answers are presented, keep in mind the words of scholar Hugh Nibley, “The two greatest nuisances in the church are (a) those who think they know enough to disprove the claims of Joseph Smith, and (b) those who think they know enough to prove them” (Hugh Nibley, *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others and the Temple* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008]).

### Timeline

- **1817-1822**—an Italian soldier serving under Napoleon, turned Egyptian excavator, Joannes Petrus Antonius Lebolo, dug in Pit Tomb 32 or Pit Tomb 33 near Thebes, Egypt and found ancient artifacts including eleven mummies. Shortly after his death, Lebolo's son sent the eleven mummies through the shipping company, Albano Oblasser, to sell in America to the highest bidder.
- **Spring 1833**—Eleven mummies and Egyptian artifacts arrived in the U.S. and were put up for sale at an auction. Michael Chandler borrowed \$6,000 to buy the mummies and artifacts and in so doing was the highest bidder at the auction. Hoping that he had purchased treasures, Chandler unwrapped the mummies and found “rolled up with some kind of linen, saturated with the same bitumen . . . two or three other small pieces of papyrus, with astronomical calculations . . .” (Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*). Chandler spent two years on a traveling mummy-show selling off the mummies and scrolls.
- **July 3, 1835**—Chandler brought his mummy-show to Kirtland, Ohio supposedly to meet the Prophet Joseph Smith. Chandler claimed to be an “Irish nephew” of the Italian excavator Lebolo. Chandler inquired “if [Joseph Smith] had a power by which he could translate the ancient Egyptian. Mr. Smith replied that he had” (Parley P. Pratt, *Millennial Star*, July 1842). Chandler presented to the Prophet Joseph the last of his four mummies and some hieroglyphics, which others supposedly had interpreted. Joseph Smith took the papyri to examine it. When he returned, his written English translation corresponded with the interpretation Chandler had already received. The Prophet displayed interest in the papyri, but not the mummies. Chandler would not break up his exhibit.
- **July 6, 1835**—Chandler issued a certificate to Joseph Smith about his translation. Church members—Joseph Coe, Simeon Andrews, and others—purchased the mummies and papyri for \$2,400 as a gift for the Prophet Joseph. The gift included “four human figures [1 woman, 3 men] . . . with two or more rolls of papyrus” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:235). Oliver Cowdery remembered that it was “two rolls . . . [with] two or three other small pieces,” that had text written “with black, and a small part, red ink or paint” (*Messenger and Advocate*, December 31, 1835).

- **July 6, 1835**—Joseph translated some “hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another, writings of Joseph of Egypt” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:235).
- **July 17-31, 1835**—Joseph worked “continually ... translating an alphabet ... and arranging a grammar” of Egyptian (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:236-238). The Book of Abraham was finished at the end of July (we have only ¼ of it).
- **Aug 7, 1835**—Church leaders met to examine an advance copy of A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ (the D&C). The minutes read, “It was deemed necessary to call the general assembly of the Church to see whether the book [mau] become a law unto the church, and a rule of faith and practice unto the same” (*JosephSmithPapers.org*; Minute Book 1, 17 Aug 1835).
- **August-September 1835**—Joseph visited with Latter-day Saints in Michigan and then returned to Kirtland.
- **October 1, 1835**—Joseph received a revelation about the “principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:286). Probably referring to Facsimile 2.
- **October 7, 1835**—“This afternoon I re-commenced translating the ancient records” or Book of Abraham (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:289).
- **October 24, 1835**—“Mr. Goodrich and wife called to see the ancient [Egyptian] records, and also Dr. Frederick G. Williams to see the mummies” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:291).
- **October 29, 1835**—Joseph hired Warren Parrish as scribe. Parrish recorded, “I have set by his side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks [sic] as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration from Heaven” (Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*).
- **November-December 1835**—Joseph recorded that people came by to see the mummies and the papyri. Neither Joseph nor his peers left any record of his using the Urim and Thummim.
- **November 19-20, 24-26, 1835**—Joseph recorded “translating the Egyptian records.” On November 20, he “made rapid progress” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:318, 320). The Church History Library contains texts from the translation of the Book of Abraham 1:1-2:18.
- **December 23, 1835**—The Prophet Joseph tried to stop exaggerations about translating the mummies and papyri by clarifying details in a local newspaper:

It has been said that the purchasers of these antiquities pretend they have the bodies of Abraham, Abimelech, (the king of the Philistines,) Joseph, who was sold into Egypt, &c., &c., for the purpose of attracting the attention of the multitude, and gulling the unwary; which is utterly false. Who these ancient inhabitants of Egypt were, I do not at present say . . .

The records were obtained from one of the catacombs in Egypt, near the place where once stood the renowned city of Thebes, by the celebrated French traveler, Antonio S[L]ebolo, in the year 1831. . . He entered the catacomb June 7, 1831, and obtained eleven mummies. There were several hundred mummies in the same catacomb; about one hundred embalmed after the first order, and placed in niches, and two or three hundred after the second and third orders, and laid upon the floor or bottom of the grand cavity. The two last orders of embalmed were so decayed, that they could not be removed, and only eleven of the first, found in the niches. On his way from Alexandria to Paris, he put in at Trieste, and, after ten days' illness, expired.

This was in the year 1832. Previous to his death, he made a will of the whole, to Mr. Michael H. Chandler, (then in Philadelphia, Pa.) his nephew, whom he supposed to be in Ireland. Accordingly, the whole were sent to Dublin, and Mr. Chandler's friends ordered them to New York, where they were received at the Custom House, in the winter or spring of 1833 (Smith, History of the Church, 2:348-350; note, History of the Church mistyped the name Lebolo as Sebolo). Joseph recorded what he was told. Chandler's story was laced with falsehoods.

- **November 2, 1837**—Joseph appointed two men to raise money for the publication of the Book of Abraham. The raising of money was delayed four years due to the closing of the Kirtland Safety Society (1837), Missouri persecutions (1838), Joseph's imprisonment (1838-1839), Latter-day Saints fleeing from Missouri and becoming refugees in Quincy (1839), moving to Nauvoo (1839), the Prophet Joseph's journey to Washington DC (1839), defending against the first attempt by Missouri to extradite Joseph back to Missouri for trial (1841), and the focus on building the Nauvoo Temple (1840-1844) and establishing the Church in the newly chartered City of Nauvoo (1841).
- **February 23, 1842**—The Prophet Joseph commissioned Reuben Hedlock to make “a cut of the size of facsimiles.”
- **March 1, 15, 16, 1842**—Three sections of the Book of Abraham were printed in the Times and Seasons newspaper in Nauvoo. The three installments were only ¼ of what the Prophet Joseph had translated. Only Facsimile #1 has its accompanying text, facsimile #2 and #3 were to accompany the later text which Joseph translated. That text has not been found (Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 4).
- **1842-1856**—The Prophet Joseph gave the four mummies to his widowed mother Lucy Mack Smith to be used as a means of income. Mother Smith showed the mummies to interested passing customers for 25 cents. As for the fragments, they were glued down and framed in 1837. They were shown by Lucy under glass, which destroyed the ability to do carbon dating of the fragments.
- **May 26, 1856**—Twelve days after the death of Lucy Mack Smith, the manuscripts (and the four mummies?) were sold by Emma Smith, her husband Lewis Bidamon, and Joseph III to Abel Combs. Combs kept 13% of the papyrus manuscript (including the damaged fragments glued and framed under glass). Combs sold the rest of his purchase to the St. Louis Museum (who sold them to the Wood Museum, which later moved to Chicago).
- **1871**—The papyri were reportedly burned in the Great Chicago Fire.
- **1947**—The 13% of the papyri in possession of Abel Combs passed to his housekeeper and then to her daughter, Alice and her husband Edward Heusser. After multiple attempts, the widower Heusser sold the 13% of the papyri to the New York City Metropolitan Museum of Art when a curator who valued Egyptology saw their offer.
- **November 19, 1967**—The Metropolitan Museum needed money and offered eleven fragments to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claiming the fragments were once among the scrolls of Joseph Smith's papyri. An anonymous donor gifted the papyri to the Church. These fragments do not include our texts. The Metropolitan Museum text is an Egyptian damaged text that had been glued and not the scroll translated as the Book of Abraham. The press did not report the story correctly, but nothing was clarified because of the Arab-Israel war at the time. Hugh Nibley responded to the flood of anti-Mormon attacks.

- **1968**—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints published the translations of the few papyri purchased from the Metropolitan Museum in the *Improvement Era*.
- **1968-1970**—Hugh Nibley publishes a long series in the *Improvement Era*, entitled “A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price.
- **1971**—Hugh Nibley publishes articles in *BYU Studies* about “The Book of Breathing” and “The Kirtland Egyptian Papers.”
- **1975**—Hugh Nibley publishes *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Deseret Book).
- **2009**—Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, is published in the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*.
- **2010**—Hugh Nibley, *One Eternal Round* is published in the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*.

### More on the Excavator

The excavator Joannes Petrus Antonius Lebolo was licensed by the French government during Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt to deal in artifacts in Thebes, across the Nile River from Luxor. His name was carved into the wall of Pit Tomb 32. Pit Tomb 33 better fits the description found in Joseph’s history of the papyrus scrolls and the eleven mummies. Sadly, the brick-lined tombs were destroyed by the excavators. Records from Lebolo’s excavation describe:

Entering these caverns, long galleries, halls, chambers, and cabinets are found, in short, they are underground palaces, all covered with painted bas-reliefs; and it is very marvelous. It is wonderful, the preservation of the colors, the amount of the works, the scrupulous attention used to make them. Lately, a new one was discovered which surpasses all the others in beauty, in the perfection of the work, and in execution. I visited it two times. The second time I spent the whole day there, examining everything; it was already late evening, and I couldn’t move myself away from there. I dined inside there in a beautiful hall, much more elegant than our ballrooms. Also, I believe that, considering all, this sepulcher of the king of Thebes is a much more sumptuous dwelling than the dwellings of our living European kings (H. Donl Peterson, “Antonio Lebolo: Excavator of the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies* 31, no 2 [Spring 1991], 14).

In winter or early spring of 1833, eleven mummies and ancient papyri (including writings of Abraham and Joseph) arrived in the United States secured in Egyptian sarcophagi. We don’t know all the details yet, but it appears that Michael Chandler lived in Philadelphia and ended up with four of the mummies. He unwrapped the female and found the scrolls. Chandler was told that no one could translate Egyptian in Pennsylvania, but a certain “Joe Smith” in Kirtland claimed to translate ancient records. Chandler contacted linguists at reputable eastern academic institutions for possible interpretation of the papyrus (Todd, “Papyri, Joseph Smith,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1059)

### Papyri in Joseph Smith’s Possession

In addition to the four mummies, the Prophet Joseph received four or five papyri. Some of the edges or other parts of two of the four scrolls were damaged. The damaged pieces were put under glass and framed in 1837. Other rolls were complete. At the time, Joseph’s papyri were described as—

1. A number of glazed slides, like picture frames, containing sheets of papyrus with Egyptian inscriptions and hieroglyphics. (The Church bought these fragments from the Metropolitan Museum—which include “the book of the dead,” and “the book of breathings.” They are identified by their prior owners, four ancient Ptolemies in Egypt).
2. “Long roll of manuscript” that the Book of Abraham was translated from.
3. “Another roll.”
4. “Two or three other small pieces of papyrus with astronomical calculations, epitaphs, etc.”

We do not have the scroll that Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Abraham (we assume the scroll burned in the Chicago fire of 1871). However, we do have information to compare what the text said with the world in which Abraham lived.

### Rosetta Stone

Did any American know Egyptian in 1833?

In 1822 the young French genius Jean Francois Champollion, with the aid of the trilingual Rosetta Stone, had first deciphered the ancient hieroglyphic writings in France. Work by him and others created an immediate international sensation, and several academic reports were published and debated, but his dictionary of Egyptian hieroglyphics would not be published in Europe until 1841. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Fran%C3%A7ois\\_Champollion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Fran%C3%A7ois_Champollion). Hence, the American academicians whom Chandler consulted in 1833-35 were unable to read the papyrus records. At best, they could only speculate on the meaning of some of the symbols when they could reach consensus on them. (H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994], p. 2).

### Archeological and Historical Validation of the Book of Abraham

Historically, within the text of the Book of Abraham, we have more evidence on its antiquity than we have for the “documentary hypothesis” of the Old Testament. One of the best recent discoveries in Abrahamic literature was found over a century after Joseph’s translation. It begins with the same four parallel phrases. Scholar John Gee has published several archeological cases that add to the historical plausibility of the Book of Abraham.

### Mummies and Fragments: Dating the Papyri

The papyri fragments were glued, so carbon dating doesn’t work. The handwriting on the papyri dates to the Greco period, but the text appears much older and was probably retranslated by different scribes over the centuries onto a later manuscript. We also have an old and newer copy of two different alphabets in Joseph Smith’s “Kirtland Egyptian Papers.” The fragments from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum that were sold to the Church date from ca. 200-1800 BC or what is known as the Middle Bronze Age.

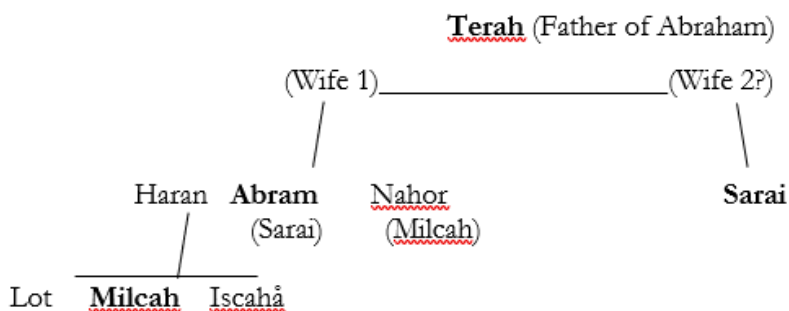
### National Awareness

When the Prophet Joseph published the first section of Abraham in the *Times and Seasons* in March 1842, he captured national attention. Three weeks later, one of the foremost newspapers in the country picked up the story. James Gordon Bennett, founder of the *New York Herald*, published on Sunday, April 3, 1842:

We give in this day’s paper a very curious chapter from the Book of Abraham which we find published in the last number of a weekly journal called the Times and Seasons, conducted by Jo. Smith, the great Mormon Prophet, in the city of Nauvoo, Hancock County, Illinois. . . This Joe Smith is, undoubtedly, one of the greatest characters of the age. He indicates as much talent, originality, and moral courage as Mahomet, Odin, or any of the other great spirits that have hitherto produced the revolutions of the past ages. . . . Some such singular prophet as Joe Smith is required to preserve the principle of faith, and to plant some new germs of civilization that may come to maturity in a thousand years. While modern philosophy, which believes in nothing but what you can touch. . . . We certainly want some such prophet to start up, take a big hold of the public mind—and stop the torrent of materialism that is hurrying the world into infidelity, immorality, licentiousness, and crime.

### A Few of the Many Points about Abraham that the Text adds to the Bible

1. Famines were a regular natural phenomenon as well as God’s way of punishing the wicked when needed (there are 130 verses in LDS scripture that mention “famine”). It sounds like Abram’s brother died because of famine (Abr 2:1).
2. Marriages were made with closer relations than we practice now. The text describes Abram married his half-sister and his brother married his niece (Gen. 20:12). Advice in the Mishnah encourages marriages within a family.



3. The Lord directs Abram to leave his “kindred.” This has already happened and continues to happen over and over. Abram records hearing or seeing the Lord in vision ten times! But Abram is not told where he is going, but only that he will be shown (Abr. 2:3, 6). His move is physical with emotional and spiritual growth.

Abram’s Visions of Jehovah—Including the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood	
VOICE OF GOD	VISION OF GOD
1:16	1:15
2:3	2:6-11 “to make of thee a minister to bear My Name”
2:22	3:11
3:4, 5, 6	
3:15	

4. Terah repented—(Abr. 1:30, 2:5) but once life gets easier, he returns to his sins. Terah’s wickedness separates him from his children (and may have been the cause of their second journey).
5. Abram becomes father of the chosen people through the priesthood (Abr. 2:10). Three major religions of that region today claim Abraham as their father—Jewish, Islamic, and Christian. The major difference in our belief is the tie to the priesthood as is evident in comparing the two accounts of this vision:

Gen. 12:2-3	Abr. 2:9-11
And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou	And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee <i>above measure</i> , and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto <i>thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations; And I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father;</i>
And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of	11. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee; and in thee ( <i>that is, in thy Priesthood</i> ) and in thy seed ( <i>that is, thy Priesthood</i> ), for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee ( <i>that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body</i> ) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal

For comments on what we would lack if we did not have the Book of Abraham found in the Pearl of Great Price, see <https://rsc.byu.edu/introduction-book-abraham/role-book-abraham-latter-day-saint-scripture>.

Regarding the contributions of the Book of Abraham to the Restoration, see further <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/role-book-abraham-restoration>

For forty of the latest insights into the details included in the Book of Abraham, be sure to visit <https://www.pearlofgreatpricecentral.org/category/book-of-abraham/>

### Sources

Jay M. Todd, “Papyri, Joseph Smith,” in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 4 vols. (NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 3:1058-1060; Donl Peterson, “Antonio Lebolo: Excavator of the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies* 31, no 2 (Spring 1991); Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:235-291; PearlOfGreatPriceCentral.com; John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000); John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017). For more writings on the Book of Abraham, see works by Hugh Nibley and Michael Rhodes.