

*The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations*  
*Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts,*  
facsimile edition

Edited by Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid

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*Reviewed by Thomas A. Wayment*

Volume four of the *Revelations and Translations* series presents for the first time a transcription and complete photographic reproduction of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' holdings of all the manuscripts, grammars, lexical aids, and other resources that were produced in the process of creating the book of Abraham. The series has already published full editions of Joseph Smith's earliest extant manuscript revelations, many of which form the basis of the Doctrine and Covenants (volume 1); the revelations that were published during Joseph Smith's lifetime (volume 2); and the full printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon (volume 3, parts 1–2).<sup>1</sup> This fourth volume in the series completes the publication of almost all of the early manuscripts connected to Latter-day Saint canonical scripture, with the exceptions of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. The Joseph Smith Papers Project is currently working on producing a volume for the former, and as for the latter, an excellent and thorough transcription, along with a few color images, has already been published.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009); Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011); Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35*, and *Part 2: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Alma 36–Moroni 10*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015).

2. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah:

Among other helpful aids, the frontmatter of *Revelations, Volume 4* includes an introduction that is insightful and succinct while avoiding many of the polemical stances that have come to characterize book of Abraham research. Following the practice of the earlier volumes in the series, the majority of the book comprises images and transcriptions of original documents, except in the case of the Egyptian papyri, which have been photographed but not transcribed for the reader. The main body of the book begins with images of the surviving papyri that were purchased by Joseph Smith and other Church leaders and that Smith used for his inspired translation of the book of Abraham. These are followed by photographs of the notebooks of characters that Joseph Smith and others copied from the papyri and images of the alphabet and grammar materials that Smith and his scribes developed to try and understand Egyptian language and writing. Finally, the book reproduces images and transcripts of the various early manuscript copies of the book of Abraham text that were created in preparation for its publication. The book ends with the printing plates used for publishing the book of Abraham in the early Church newspaper *Times and Seasons*. An appendix is included that features a brief chronology for the Abraham project, which began in 1835 and reached completion in 1842, thus affirming that work continued on the Abraham project post 1835. This easy-to-use appendix is an invaluable contribution for Latter-day Saint scholars who have been contending for some time about whether translation of the papyri continued into the Nauvoo, Illinois, period. The final appendix compares characters copied from the papyri to their accompanying explanations from the grammar books and alphabet and is also helpful for researchers.

The publication of these materials comes at a timely moment for the Church and scholars working on the book of Abraham. The internal dynamics that are obvious in the Church's Gospel Topics Essay on the book of Abraham are less determinative for this publication; the essay includes the claims that some translations "were not based on any known physical records" and that Latter-day Saint and other Egyptologists "agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the book of Abraham," but it offers no cogent explanation

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Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004). Though this volume provides a transcription of the Joseph Smith Translation, Faulring, Jackson, and Matthews do not adhere to the same transcription style, policies, and procedures that the Joseph Smith Papers volumes use.

of how this could occur.<sup>3</sup> The publication of the grammar and alphabet materials alongside the text of the book of Abraham, however, represents a process by which Smith explored an unfamiliar language and sought to interpret it even though the language remained unknown to him. For decades, the grammar and alphabet have remained largely on the sidelines, as unwanted byproducts that were potentially produced by scribes who worked on their own. Now, these products are situated within Joseph Smith's translation process without discrimination, and that will prove to be one of the most important contributions of this new volume.

A careful study of the grammar materials produces some fascinating lines of inquiry that make this a potential treasure trove for new research. The text of the grammar is loaded with information that begs further research, and my own initial perusal quickly focused on the exploratory language of priesthood that was used in the grammar and alphabet books (87), the softening of the racial claims of the Joseph Smith Translation regarding Ham (123), the concept of a "church" that existed in Abraham's day (137), the gendering of priesthood and the way men and women are described (149), the clear reliance upon language from Genesis 1–2 (165), and the subtle interpretation of biblical stories (173). These topics and others will keep scholars employed for years.

My only significant complaint with the publication was the alarm that I felt at seeing the full facsimile images of the papyri that were still glued to nineteenth-century paper backing! The images, the authors explain, were created with cutting-edge technology (xxxvi–xxvii), but the fact remains that in their current state of preservation, these papyri will eventually suffer decomposition from the glue used to adhere them to the paper. As a result, some of these papyri will be pulled apart by their fibers and ruined. If this published review results in any corrective efforts, I hope it will be to preserve the papyri for future generations. I have seen with my own eyes the destruction of papyri by mylar sheeting and improper mounting, and hopefully these treasures will be preserved in a way that will make them accessible for future generations.

With the publication of this volume, we have, for the first time, access to the full range of manuscripts, copies, grammars, and alphabet

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3. "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," *Gospel Topics Essays*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>.

documents used in the production of a text that would later be canonized. The volume presents the original artifacts (the papyri), the deliberative byproducts (the alphabet and grammar), and a variety of early copies that document the process of creating a publishable text—all the while offering rich footnotes that contain contemporary documentary evidence. The scholarship that went into the production of this volume achieves the highest standards the discipline can aspire to, something we have come to expect from the Joseph Smith Papers team. The scholarship drawn upon in this volume engages all perspectives, and the works of Robert Ritner, John Gee, and others are quoted and referenced throughout the work. An excellent bibliography is included at the end. This book is the high-water mark in book of Abraham studies.

I must acknowledge that I was prepared to be let down by this volume, mostly because of the rather fractious debates that exist in book of Abraham research. I was pleasantly surprised to see that the authors found a way to acknowledge the entire academic community that has previously worked on this important text. The book is already quite long and was probably expensive to produce, with its beautiful color plates, but it would have been helpful to provide readers with a postscript on the 1851 edition and Franklin D. Richards's later edition of the book of Abraham, as well as information on the later canonization process that took place after Brigham Young's death, although those two matters may be perceived as stepping beyond the goals of the editors' original project. But since Franklin D. Richards, James E. Talmage, and others continued to shape the text, they represent important contributions to the canonized version. In the end, this is an excellent volume that will both create conversations and inform existing academic positions.

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