

Joseph Smith and the Lebolo Egyptian Papyri

Joseph Smith and the Lebolo Egyptian Papyri

James R. Clark

The eleven fragments of Egyptian papyri returned to the Church by gift from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art on November 27, 1967, have had a long and eventful history. Just what that history was before their discovery in 1818–1821 by Antonio Lebolo is not certain. Whether these particular fragments were once in the possession of or inscribed by Abram-Abraham, Prince of God and Father of the Faithful, has not been determined. What can be traced is their general movements after their discovery by Lebolo.

In the opinion of Dr. Aziz S. Atiya, the man who rediscovered them in the Metropolitan Museum, it is quite certain that they are genuine and authentic ancient Egyptian papyri. A world-renowned authority on ancient documents, Dr. Atiya is convinced that these fragments were once part of the collection of Egyptian papyri which were “in the possession of Joseph Smith.”¹

Dr. Hugh Nibley has been asked to discuss the fragments as Egyptian documents for this special section of *BYU Studies*, and I have been asked to comment on the history of their original discovery by Lebolo and their transmission over the past 146–149 years, as far as we know the story. At the outset it is important to point out that the collection of four mummies and several papyri that came into the hands of Joseph Smith in July, 1835, were part of a large collection of Egyptian artifacts gathered between 1817–1823 by Antonio Lebolo, a Piedmontese adventurer, who died in 1823.

New Findings on the Lebolo Mummies

Recent research in Italy indicates that portions of the Lebolo collection are presently in the Museo Egitto in Turin, Italy, and that there is a monograph written in 1824 about that collection by Giulio di San Quintino, the curator of that museum in the 1820's.²

The monograph notes that San Quintino spoke personally with Lebolo about his discovery, and that he also used some of Lebolo's notes in preparing the monograph. It was San Quintino's belief that the tomb Lebolo entered was not that of a single family or even of a single dynasty since not all the mummies found there were of the same family and evidence suggested that the tomb had had repeated use over a considerable period of time.

By combining information from the monograph and from Dr. Curto, the present director of the Museo Egitto in Turin, it is possible to make some identification of eight of the original eleven or twelve mummies which made up the Lebolo find and to trace their disposition. The Museum in Turin currently holds four mummies from this collection:

- (1) A baby named Petemenofi who died August 27, AD 123
- (2) A woman named Bonanno
- (3) A sister to the above Bonanno
- (4) A second sister to Bonanno³

San Quintino's monograph lists the names and tells of the disposition of four or five more mummies of that collection:

- (1) A man named Petemenone who died June 2, AD 116. This mummy was sold by Lebolo to Frederic Cailliaud (1787–1869), a French traveler and mineralogist. It went to the Paris Museum in 1824, and has been the subject of several articles, notably by Letronne and Champollion.
- (2) A child called Tfute who died January 15, AD 127. This mummy Lebolo sold to Giovanni d'Anastasi [also spelled Athanasi] (1799–1837 +). A detailed description of this mummy was published in 1823 by George Frances Gery (1795–1854) for the Egyptian Society of London.
- (3) A female named Senchosis who died March 11, AD 146. This is one of two mummies Lebolo sold to Baron Heinrich Carl Menu Minutoli (1772–1846), a Prussian military officer. It is reported that these two mummies were lost at sea off the coast of Africa during transport to Europe.
- (4) A man named Sotero. It is known that Lebolo had this mummy in his possession in Trieste, Italy, shortly before his death in 1823.⁴

Thus we see that most of the mummies in the Lebolo find were sold while they were still in Africa or Europe. Of the remaining three or four, Leslie W. Bradshaw writes:

Nothing is mentioned by San Quintino concerning the remaining three mummies of the original 11 or 12; consequently we have no names or dates. If we assume that Lebolo kept these three in his possession until a later time, then they, together with that of the man named Sotero. . . could have been the four received by Michael Chandler at New York City. . . .⁵

This summary and conclusion by Bradshaw are interesting in light of a postscript to Oliver Cowdery's letter to William Frye published in the *Letter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate*, December, 1835:

You will have understood from the foregoing, that eleven mummies were taken from the catacomb, at the time of which I have been speaking, and nothing definite having been said of their disposal, I may with propriety add a few words. Seven of the said eleven were purchased by gentlemen for private museums, previous to Mr. Chandler's visit to this place, with a small quantity of papyrus, similar (as he says), to the astronomical representations, contained with the present two rolls, of which I previously spoke, and the remaining four by gentlemen resident here.

Many of us who have been following the history of the Lebolo collection for some years had assumed that the sale of the seven mummies to "gentlemen for private museums" had been transacted by Chandler in the United States. Bradshaw's research, however, would seem to indicate that only four mummies from the Lebolo find ever came to America and these came into the possession of Joseph Smith. But this does not take into account the claim that Dr. Samuel George Morton purchased a female mummy from Lebolo's heirs in Philadelphia in 1833.⁶

Joseph Smith's own statement on that portion of the collection which Michael Chandler brought to him identifies his source as a Lebolo heir but at a later date than 1833.

On the 3rd of July, [1835] Michael H. Chandler came to Kirtland to exhibit some Egyptian mummies. There were four human figures, together with some two or more rolls of papyrus covered with hieroglyphic figures and devices. . . . (DHC 2:235)

What Were the Papyri?

Several of the Saints in Kirtland purchased the mummies, and then as Joseph Smith commenced the translation of some "characters of hieroglyphics," he and his two scribes, W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery, "found that one of the rolls *contained the writings of Abraham*, another *the writings of Joseph of Egypt*, . . ." (DHC 2:236: italics mine) For the remainder of the month of July, 1835, he was "continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients." (DHC 2:238) No further journal entry regarding his work with this collection of papyri occurred until October 1, 1835, when he indicated that with Phelps and Cowdery he was once more at work on the "Egyptian alphabet," and they had "the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients unfolded to our understanding." (DHC 2:286)

Between October 1 and December 31, 1835, there are fifteen individual entries in Joseph Smith's journal referring to the papyri, the mummies, and/or the records. Six of these entries call the papyri "Egyptian records." Six additional entries refer to the collection as "ancient records" or "records of antiquity." In another entry he calls them simply "the papyrus."

Only in one entry does Joseph Smith refer to them as “sacred records.” The important point here seems to be that while in July, 1835, Joseph Smith referred to one roll as containing “the writings of Abraham” and “another the writings of Joseph of Egypt,” in subsequent references during the three month period when he was working most intensively with them he spoke of the papyri simply as “Egyptian records” or “ancient records.” These numerous entries should at least raise a caution against any assumption that the entire collection of papyri that Joseph Smith had was exclusively the record of Abraham and Joseph. The fact that these two documents were considered most important by the Prophet may have led to that faulty assumption. Certainly the interest was (and is) high in whatever association Abraham and Joseph had with the papyri. By reminding everyone that the Bible tells us that neither Abraham nor Joseph was left buried in Egypt, Joseph Smith put down a rumor that was spreading in October, 1835, even in the public press,⁷ that in his collection he had the mummified bodies of Abraham and Joseph. Then on December 31, 1835, he wrote the following in his journal about the mummies in his possession: “Who these ancient inhabitants of Egypt were, I do not at present say.” (DHC 2:348)

Similar Descriptions

Joseph Smith’s description of the records of Abraham and Joseph is very close to Dr. Atiya’s description of fragments from the Metropolitan Museum. Joseph Smith said:

The record. . . is beautifully written on papyrus, with black, and a small part red, ink or paint, in perfect preservation. The characters are such as you find upon the coffins of mummies—hieroglyphics, etc.; with many characters like the present (though probably not quite so square) form of the Hebrews without points. (DHC 2:348)

Dr. Atiya described the eleven fragments found in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art as inscribed principally with black ink made with “soot and glue,” one of the two ancient methods of making ink for inscribing papyrus and the more permanent of the two methods.⁸

Non-LDS Descriptions of the Papyri

On January 30, 1836, Joseph Smith showed the “record of Abraham” to a number of visitors, among them his Hebrews teacher, Rabbi Joshua Seixas, who “pronounced it original beyond all doubt.” (DHC 2:388)

In 1837 a Mr. William S. West, who was not a follower of Joseph Smith but was conversant with what was being said about him and his possession of the “Egyptian mummies and records,” wanted a first-hand look at these

mummies and documents. He visited Kirtland, Ohio, and later published a report of that visit in a sixteen page pamphlet. West says of the collection:

The Mormons have four mummies, and a quantity of records, written on papyrus, in Egyptian hieroglyphics, which were brought from the Catacombs near Thebes, in Egypt. They say that the mummies were Egyptian, but the records are those of Abraham and Joseph, and contain important information respecting the creation, the fall of man, the deluge, the patriarchs, the Book of Mormon, the lost tribes, the gathering, the end of the world, the judgment, &c., &c. . . .⁹

He also indicated that information was given him while at Kirtland that the papyri were in fragments because:

. . . These records were torn by being taken from the roll of embalming salve which contained them, and some parts entirely lost. . . .¹⁰

Samuel Woolley, in a diary entry in 1838, claims the distinction of helping to transport the mummies and papyrus from Kirtland, Ohio, to Far West, Missouri, when Joseph Smith moved Church headquarters there.¹¹

In 1840 Joseph Smith had settled at Nauvoo, Illinois, and was receiving numerous interested visitors. One such visitor became the anonymous author who wrote in the *Quincy Whig*, published in nearby Quincy, Illinois, the following interview with Joseph Smith:

It was a beautiful morning towards the close of April last, when the writer. . . accompanied by a friend, crossed the Mississippi river, from Montrose (Iowa), to pay a visit to the prophet. . . .

After he had shown us the fine grounds around his dwelling; he conducted us, at our request, to an upper room, where he drew aside the curtains of a case; and showed us several Egyptian Mummies, which we were told that the Church had purchased, at his suggestion, some time before, for a large sum of money.

The embalmed body that stands near the centre of the case, said he, is one of the Pharaohs, who sat upon the throne of Egypt; and the female figure by it is probably one of the daughters. . . .

He then walked to a secretary, on the opposite side of the room, and drew out several frames, covered with glass, under which were numerous fragments of Egyptian papyrus, on which, as usual, a great variety of hieroglyphical characters had been imprinted.

These ancient records, said he, throw great light upon the subject of Christianity. They have been unrolled and preserved with great labor and care. My time has been hitherto too much taken up to translate the whole of them, but I will show you how I interpret certain parts. There, said he, pointing to a particular character, that is the signature of the patriarch Abraham.

The importance of this published interview, historically, is that it shows Joseph Smith ready to identify one of the four mummies as a

pharaoh or King of Egypt, that it confirms West's statement that the papyri were in fragments, and that it notes these fragments had been put under glass and mounted in frames. As the reader may see from the pictures in this issue, one of the fragments of the Metropolitan Museum collection is in a wooden frame under glass and certain others, notably the one that Joseph Smith apparently used for the reproduction of Facsimile No. 1 might well have been in such a frame formerly since its present width corresponds with the width of the frame surrounding the framed fragment. There is also a painting in the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City which shows Joseph Smith's mother seated in a chair, presumably in her home, and on the wall in the background is a similar frame with a drawing of Facsimile No. 1 under glass.

Publication of the Book of Abraham

Two years later, in 1842, when Joseph Smith was ready to begin publication of his translation of portions of these Egyptian records, he assembled a staff in the *Times and Seasons* office to assist him. Wilford Woodruff was the business manager and John Taylor the assistant editor; Joseph Smith took over the editorship of the periodical specifically to supervise the publication of his translations of these ancient records. Reuben Hedlock was instructed to prepare the woodcuts for the illustrations (facsimiles) to accompany Joseph Smith's translations.

Joseph Smith published the first installment of his translations from the Egyptian records in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons*, along with Facsimile No. 1 as an illustration called for in the text. Entries in Joseph Smith's journal for March, 1842, indicate that he continued to translate and revise the manuscripts of the translation even while they were being published. The entire contents of the present Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price with its three facsimiles had been published by May 16, 1842. In February, 1843, John Taylor, the new editor of the *Times and Seasons*, promised his readers that Joseph Smith would furnish subscribers "with further extracts from the Book of Abraham," but circumstances and the violent death of Joseph Smith on June 27, 1844, prevented the fulfillment of that promise.

Letter of Sale Identifies Present Papyri

The letter of sale that accompanies the Metropolitan Museum fragments throws new light on the disposition of the mummies and papyri after the death of Joseph Smith. Much of this story I had already reconstructed from other sources available to me in 1955. I summarized this research on pages 146 to 163 of *The Story of The Pearl of Great Price* as follows:

Of the four mummies and two or more rolls of papyrus acquired by Joseph Smith in 1835, the St. Louis Museum acquired two mummies and *perhaps* a part of the papyrus in 1856. [These were later sold to the Chicago Museum in 1863.]¹²

The newly found letter fixes the date of May 26, 1856, for the sale of the “four Egyptian Mummies with the records of them” by “L. C. Bidamon, Emma Bidamon, Joseph Smith [III]” to a Mr. A. Combs. This letter substantiates much of our earlier research, and it shows that the general opinion that Joseph Smith’s mother had “sold the relics sometime before her death”¹³ to have been in error. The current information gives us a new view of Lucy Mack Smith because it shows that she steadfastly refused to sell them while she lived. It now appears that the collection of mummies and papyri that were once in the possession of Joseph Smith was not divided up until after it left the Smith family because it was sold to Combs as a collection.

It seems that it was split up shortly after Combs bought it because the published catalogs state that the St. Louis Museum acquired only two of the four mummies also in 1856. The disposition and whereabouts of the other mummies and the additional fragments of papyri not in the Metropolitan Museum gift are still subjects open for research. It is evident that as important as this “find” is, and I would not depreciate its importance or significance in any way, it is only a very small portion of the collection once in the hands of Joseph Smith.

The known history of the fragments we now have was printed in the December 2, 1967, *Church News* announcement of their being given to the Church. Apparently what Combs did not sell or otherwise dispose of went to his housekeeper, then to her daughter, Mrs. Alice C. Heusser, who first drew the Museum’s attention to the papyri in 1918. Her husband, Edward Heusser, sold the fragments to the Museum in 1947, where they had lain until Dr. Atiya saw them.

It is still too early to offer any real assessment as to the significance of this gracious gift by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Church. A detailed study of the fragments and research on new leads must be done before we could do more than agree with Dr. Atiya and President N. Eldon Tanner that finding and receiving these papyri fragments are exciting and deeply gratifying to us all.

Dr. Clark, professor of religious education at Brigham Young University, has studied and written widely on the Pearl of Great Price.

1. Personal interview by the writer with Dr. Aziz S. Atiya, University of Utah Intercultural Education Center, December 13, 1967.

2. Leslie W. Bradshaw, "The Lebolo Mummies in the Turin Museum, Italy," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Lady Historic Archaeology*, No. 101 (May 1, 1967), pp. 2-4.

3. *Ibid.* Brother Bradshaw, an LDS missionary in Italy, interviewed Dr. Curto at the Museo Egitto in Turin. He noted that Dr. Curto dates the Lebolo find in 1818. (p. 2)

4. Giulio di San Quintino, "Interpretazione e Confronto di Una Billinque Inscrizione Che Sta Sopra Una Mummica Egiziana del R. Museo di Torino," *Lezioni Archeologiche*, 1824, as cited by Leslie W. Bradshaw above.

5. Bradshaw, "The Lebolo Mummies," p. 5.

6. David C. Martin, "A Lebolo Mummy Found in Philadelphia," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, No. 101 (May 1, 1967), p. 5.

7. *Commercial Bulletin and Missouri Literary Register*, St. Louis, Missouri, October 12, 1835.

8. Interview with Dr. Atiya, December 13, 1967.

9. William S. West, *A Few Interesting Facts Respecting the Rise, Progress, and Pre-tensions of the Mormons*, (Warren, Ohio: 1837).

10. *Ibid.*

11. Unpublished diary of Samuel Woolley in the possession of the Woolley family in Cardston, Alberta, Canada.

12. James R. Clark, *The Story of the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft. 1955), p. 162.

13. *Ibid.*