

By His Own Hand upon Papyrus

In the current (2013) edition of the Pearl of Great Price, the Book of Abraham is prefaced with this explanatory head: “A Translation of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt. The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.”¹ This title is based on the March 1, 1842, printing of the Book of Abraham in the *Times and Seasons*, with some alteration. As first published, the statement read, “A TRANSLATION of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands, from the Catacombs of Egypt, purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.”² A look at the Kirtland-era manuscript evidence for the Book of Abraham reveals a similar phrase: “Translation of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand upon papyrus and found in the CataCombs of Egypts.”³

1. *The Pearl of Great Price: A Selection from the Revelations, Translations, and Narrations of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 29.

2. “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704. The Salt Lake City 1878 edition of the Pearl of Great Price dropped the phrase “purporting to be” from the title. This omission was retained in subsequent editions, including the 1902 edition prepared by James E. Talmage that serves as the basis for the 1981 and current 2013 editions of the book.

3. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian Hauglid, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018), 219. To view the manuscript online, see “Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–C [Abraham 1:1–2:18],” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 26, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-manuscript-circa-july-circa-november-1835-c-abraham-11-218/1>.

Some have wondered how the papyrus acquired by Joseph Smith could have possibly been written by Abraham's "own hand" when it dates to circa 300 BC, many centuries after Abraham's lifetime.⁴ Before answering this question, the first issue to resolve is whether the phrase "by his own hand, upon papyrus," was part of the ancient Book of Abraham text or a modern statement by Joseph Smith or his scribes reflecting their beliefs about the nature of the papyri. Some evidence can be interpreted to suggest that Joseph Smith and other early Latter-day Saints believed the Egyptian papyri they acquired were as old as Abraham himself,⁵ although caution is necessary in evaluating this evidence, since some of these sources are hearsay and "may have confused 'written by the hand of Abraham' (authorship) with 'handwriting of Abraham' (his personal penmanship)."⁶ Even if the phrase "written by his own hand, upon papyrus," reflects an assumption by Joseph Smith or other nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints about the age of the papyri, this would not necessarily diminish the historicity or authenticity of the

4. Marc Coenen, "The Dating of the Papyri Joseph Smith I, X and XI and Min Who Massacres His Enemies," in *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years, Part I: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 1998), 1103–15; Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathing: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 3.

5. Joseph Smith, "Editorial, circa 1 March 1842, Draft," 1, in *Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimbürger, and Christopher James Blythe, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2019), 207; "A Glance at the Mormons," *Alexandria Gazette*, July 11, 1840, [2]; "The Mormon Population of Montrose and Nauvoo," *Boston Evening Transcript* 15 (January 20, 1844): 2; Charles Francis Adams Sr., Journal, May 15, 1844, repr. in Henry Adams, "Charles Francis Adams Visits the Mormons in 1844," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 68 (October 1944–May 1947): 285; Henry Halkett, "Henry's Notes upon Joe Smith the Prophet [May 1844]," circa 1845, 5–6, Miscellaneous Collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.; Josiah Quincy, "The Mormons—a Sketch of Their History," *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* 65, no. 4 (January 28, 1854): [1]; *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 386; Wilford Woodruff, "Journal (January 1, 1841–December 31, 1842)," February 19, 1842, Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed January 26, 2023, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/a9d1a2cb-18fe-445d-a5e4-350caaf63442/page/28532206-eb7f-4fe4-b955-9b5763ab18d6>; Parley P. Pratt, "Notices," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 3, no. 2 (June 1852): 32.

6. Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 155. See also the discussion in John Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyrus," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 192–95.



FIGURE 24. A relief at the mortuary complex at Saqqara depicting ancient Egyptian scribes with their scribal equipment in the act of writing. Photograph by Stephen O. Smoot.

Book of Abraham for the same reason that Joseph Smith’s assumptions about the contents of the Book of Mormon (such as its geography) as the translator of that text do not necessarily diminish the Nephite record’s historicity or authenticity.⁷

What’s more, in contrast to the manuscript version, this published version of this statement in the *Times and Seasons* has commas that separate “written by his own hand” from the rest of the phrase, so that it could be read as saying “purporting to be the writings of Abraham . . . upon papyrus,” with everything else being parenthetical. It could even be read as “some ancient records that have fallen into our hands, from the catacombs of Egypt . . . upon papyrus,” merely stating on what medium the writings came. To be sure, the manuscript version of the phrase seems to push against this interpretation, given that the ordering of the phrase makes it harder to separate “by his own hand” from “upon papyrus,” but the point still remains that the documentary evidence is not altogether clear enough to know precisely what Joseph Smith may have been assuming.

On the other hand, some scholars have argued that the phrase “the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus,” was the ancient title of the text itself. As they have observed, the phrase “by his own hand,”

7. See the comments in John E. Clark, “Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 84–87, which apply just as well to the Book of Abraham.

or something like it, was used in ancient Egypt simply to denote authorship.⁸ For example, one ancient Egyptian text features this line: “[If it (so) happens] that you want to recite a writing, come to me, so that I can have you taken to the place where this (particular) Book [lit. “papyrus”] is, of which Thoth was the one who wrote it with his own hand, himself, when he had come down after the (other) gods.”⁹

The literal idiom used here in ancient Egyptian is “with his own hand” (*[n-]ḏr.t=f ḥ=f*), which indeed denotes authorship.¹⁰ A similar idiom—“written . . . with his own fingers” (*m ḏb^cw=f*)—is also attested in ancient Egypt as a way to attribute authorship.¹¹ The idiom “by/in the hand” to denote authorship, authority, or possession (“in the possession, charge of,” “from,” “through,” “because of,” “be done by,” and so forth) also appears in the Egyptian language as spoken in Abraham’s day (*m-^c*), reinforcing the possibility that the phrase was original to the ancient text prepared by Abraham.¹² (It even survives into Coptic, the latest and

8. Hugh Nibley, “As Things Stand at the Moment,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 1 (1969): 74–78; Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary P. Gillum, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 14 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 2000), 4–9; compare John Gee, “Were Egyptian Texts Divinely Written?,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed. J. C. Goyon and C. Cardin (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2007), 807; and John Gee, “Literary Titles from the Greco-Roman Period,” in *En détail—Philologie und Archäologie im Diskurs: Festschrift für Hans-W. Fischer-Elfert*, ed. Marc Brose and others (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 344–45.

9. Steve Vinson, *The Craft of a Good Scribe: History, Narrative and Meaning in the First Tale of Setne Khaemwas* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2017), 114; compare Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume III: The Late Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 118; William K. Simpson, “The Romance of Setna Khaemwas and the Mummies (Setna I),” in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, ed. William Kelly Simpson, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 456; and James Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Language: An Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 191.

10. Janet H. Johnson, ed., *The Demotic Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2001), 60; Janet H. Johnson, *Thus Wrote Onchsheshonqy: An Introductory Grammar of Demotic*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2000), 31; see also the discussion in Gee, “Were Egyptian Texts Divinely Written?,” 807–10, esp. 809; and Gee, “Literary Titles from the Greco-Roman Period,” 344–45.

11. Gee, “Were Egyptian Texts Divinely Written?,” 809, citing P. Louvre 3284 2, 8/9, and other texts.

12. Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), §178; James Hoch, *Middle Egyptian Grammar* (Mississauga, Can.: Benben Publications, 1997), §81.

final stage of the Egyptian language.¹³) For example, a stela belonging to the Egyptian king Kamose (ca. 1550 BC) describes how he intercepted a messenger with a letter written by his enemy, the Hyksos king Apophis. “For it was on the upland way of the oasis that I captured his messenger going south to Kush with a written letter,” the stela says.¹⁴ The letter is then reproduced on the stela in full.¹⁵ Although it is a copy of a text that was almost certainly originally written by a court scribe, the letter is nevertheless said in Kamose’s stela to have been literally written “by the hand” of the Hyksos ruler, meaning it was from him or that he otherwise claimed ownership of its content: “I found it [the letter; *šꜥt*] saying in writing: ‘By the hand of the ruler of Avaris, Aa-User-Re, the Son of Re, Apophis, hail to my son, the ruler of Kush.’”¹⁶

This phrase also appears in the Bible. For example, some prophetic books speak of oracles or “the word of the Lord” coming through or by certain prophets (for example, Mal. 1:1; Hag. 1:1; 2:1; Zech. 7:7, 12). The literal Hebrew idiom in these passages, however, is “by/in the hand” (*bē yad*). In the New Testament, some of Paul’s epistles conclude with a short phrase indicating the Apostle wrote them “with his own hand,” even though he surely employed scribes in helping him compose his letters, and even after those letters were recopied by subsequent scribes (see 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thes. 3:17; Philem. 1:19).¹⁷

Significantly, an “autobiography” of a Semitic ruler named Idrimi from Abraham’s time attributes authorship of the text to the ruler himself while at the same time overtly mentioning the name of the scribe

13. Bentley Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, 3rd rev. ed. (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), §209; Gregory E. Sterling, *Coptic Paradigms: A Summary of Sahidic Coptic Morphology* (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2008), 32.

14. William K. Simpson, “The Kamose Texts,” in Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 349; H. S. Smith and Alexandrina Smith, “A Reconsideration of the Kamose Texts,” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 103 (1976): 61.

15. Simpson, “Kamose Texts,” 349–50.

16. Wolfgang Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit und neue Texte der 18. Dynastie* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1983), 94, translation ours (*gm.n=i hr=s m dd m sš m-ꜥ hꜥꜥ hwt-wꜥrt ꜥꜥ-wsr-Rꜥ sꜥ Rꜥ ippꜥ hr nd-hrt nt sꜥ-i hꜥꜥ n kšꜥ*); compare Simpson, “Kamose Texts,” 349; Smith and Smith, “Reconsideration of the Kamose Texts,” 61.

17. Lincoln H. Blumell, “Scribes and Ancient Letters: Implications for the Pauline Epistles,” in *How the New Testament Came to Be: The Thirty-fifth Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Frank F. Judd Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 208–26.

who physically wrote the text.¹⁸ It would not be difficult to imagine a similar situation where Abraham composed his record with the help of scribes while nevertheless claiming ownership of and responsibility for the text.

So whatever Joseph Smith and early Latter-day Saints may have assumed about how old the papyri were or who physically wrote their contents, the following conclusion can be reasonably drawn from the surviving evidence:

The heading [of the Book of Abraham] does not [necessarily] indicate that Abraham had written that particular copy but rather that he was the author of the original. . . . A text, regardless of how many copies of it exist in the world, is written by one author. However, each copy of that text is a manuscript. . . . We all know that when an author of the ancient world wrote something, if those writings were to survive or be disseminated, the text had to be copied again and again and again, for generation upon generation. When the heading states that the text was written by Abraham's own hand, it notes who the author is, not who copied down the particular manuscript that came into Joseph's possession.¹⁹

Further Reading

Nibley, Hugh. *Abraham in Egypt*, edited by Gary P. Gillum, 4–9. 2nd ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 2000.

———. “As Things Stand at the Moment.” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 1 (1969): 74–78.

18. See John Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 34–39, esp. 37.

19. Kerry Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 230.