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 Catecombs 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

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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.

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. 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, 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).” 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


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,”


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**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.
or something like it, was used in ancient Egypt simply to denote authorship. 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.”

The literal idiom used here in ancient Egyptian is “with his own hand” ([n-]ḏrt.f hw=f), which indeed denotes authorship. A similar idiom—“written . . . with his own fingers” (m ḏw=f)—is also attested in ancient Egypt as a way to attribute authorship. 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-p), reinforcing the possibility that the phrase was original to the ancient text prepared by Abraham. (It even survives into Coptic, the latest and

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final stage of the Egyptian language.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{14} The letter is then reproduced on the stela in full.\textsuperscript{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; št‘] 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.’”\textsuperscript{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” (bê 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).\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{15} Simpson, “Kamose Texts,” 349–50.

\textsuperscript{16} Wolfgang Helck, \textit{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 ss m-ṣ hp$k hwr-wr’t ṣ-wsr-Rʾ ss Rʾ îppi hr nd-hrt nt ss-i hp$k n kšl); compare Simpson, “Kamose Texts,” 349; Smith and Smith, “Reconsideration of the Kamose Texts,” 61.

who physically wrote the text. 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.

Further Reading


