

How Did Joseph Smith Translate the Book of Abraham?

Multiple sources associated with the coming forth of the Book of Abraham spoke of Joseph Smith “translating” the text from the papyri he acquired.¹ The Prophet himself used this language to describe his own activity with the text. For example, an entry in his journal under the date November 19, 1835, indicates the Prophet “spent the day in translating” the Egyptian records.² In an unpublished editorial that was apparently meant to be printed in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* (the issue that saw the publication of the first installment of the Book of Abraham), Joseph Smith signaled his desire to “contin[u]e to translate & publish [the text] as fast as possible [until] the whole is completed.”³ What was published with the Book of Abraham was a

1. See, for instance, “History, 1838–1856, Volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838],” 596, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/50>; “John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847,” [76], in *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 86; and Warren Parrish, letter to the editor of the *Painesville Republican*, February 5, 1838, in “Mormonism,” *Painesville Republican* 2, nos. 14–15 (February 15, 1838): [3].

2. “Journal, 1835–1836,” November 19, 1835, 46, in *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 107.

3. “Editorial, circa 1 March 1842, Draft,” 1, in *Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimburger, and Christopher James Blythe, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2019), 207. See also Wilford Woodruff, “Letter to Parley P. Pratt, 12 June 1842,” [3], Wilford Woodruff Papers, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/1981baad-5423-44bb-905b-cd4339c8f85d/page/aa122c61-597f-4e47-ac2b-9278833b3ca3>: “The Saints abroad manifest much interest in the Book of Abraham in the T[imes] & Seasons it will be continued as fast as Joseph gets time to translate.”

preface announcing it as “A Translation Of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands . . . purporting to be the writings of Abraham.”⁴

On at least one occasion shortly after its publication, Joseph Smith described the Book of Abraham as a “revelation” instead of a translation.⁵ This raises a question about what these words may have meant to the Prophet and what he may have thought about the nature of the text of the Book of Abraham that he produced. There are plenty of instances where Joseph used the word “translation” to mean utilizing available scholarly tools to convert an ancient language into modern English. This, for example, is how he used the term when studying Hebrew, which he learned from a teacher using a grammar book and dictionary.⁶ However, as with the Book of Mormon, sources indicate that Joseph professed that the translation of the Book of Abraham came by revelation and the gift and power of God. So, while Joseph appears to have used the word “translation” to describe the Book of Abraham as meaning the conversion of an ancient text into modern English, the means or methods he used to accomplish this translation were uncommon by conventional academic standards—namely, revelation. This is similar to what Joseph said about his efforts to render other ancient scriptural texts into English throughout his ministry. A review of the different texts he produced and how he produced them, therefore, appears relevant to how we might better understand the nature of the translation of the Book of Abraham.⁷

4. “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704.

5. “Persecution of the Prophets,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 21 (September 1, 1842): 902.

6. While learning Hebrew, the Prophet spoke of “studying,” “reading,” “learning,” and “translating” biblical Hebrew in journal entries dated January 26, 29; February 1, 3, 5, 9, 11–13, 15, 21–23, 26–28; and March 10, 16, 24–25, 29, 1836. See “Journal, 1835–1836,” 142–185, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/143>. For a discussion, see Matthew J. Grey, “The Word of the Lord in the Original: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 249–302.

7. See the overview and discussion in Kerry Muhlestein, “Book of Abraham, Translation Of,” in *The Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 63–69; Kerry Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of Their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 32–39; Hugh Nibley, “Translated Correctly?,” in *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2005), 51–65; and Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018), xxii–xxvi.

The Book of Mormon

Joseph Smith's signature work of scripture is the Book of Mormon, which the Prophet claimed to have translated from ancient gold plates "by the gift, and power of God."⁸ While early efforts to decipher the "reformed Egyptian" (Morm. 9:32) characters on the plates evidently did involve some mental effort by the Prophet and his scribes,⁹ ultimately the translation was revealed through the use of divinely prepared seer stones.¹⁰ Because we benefit from multiple eyewitness accounts of those who participated in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, we have a fairly good understanding of how it was produced. "When Joseph Smith began translating the Book of Mormon in 1827, he usually left the plates in a box or wrapped in a cloth, placed the [Nephite] interpreters or his seer stone (both of which seem to have been called Urim and Thummim) in a hat, and read the translation he saw in the stone to a scribe."¹¹ All of this suggests that Joseph Smith's mechanism for translating the Book of Mormon, while still conveying one language (Egyptian or Hebrew) to another (English), was more closely synonymous with revelation.¹² "This sacred ancient record was not 'translated' in the traditional way that scholars would translate ancient texts by learning an ancient language. We ought to look at the process more like a 'revelation' with the aid of physical instruments provided by the Lord, as opposed to a 'translation' by one with knowledge of languages."¹³

8. "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.

9. David E. Sloan, "The Anthon Transcripts and the Translation of the Book of Mormon: Studying It Out in the Mind of Joseph Smith," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 57–81.

10. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey and others (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 61–79; and Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016).

11. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 20.

12. For an overview, see Michael Hubbard MacKay, "'Git Them Translated': Translating the Characters on the Gold Plates," in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 83–116; and Brant A. Gardner, "Translating the Book of Mormon," in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 21–32.

13. Ulisses Soares, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *Ensign* 50, no. 5 (May 2020): 33.

The Parchment of John (Doctrine and Covenants 7)

Section 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in April 1829 just before or during the time when Oliver acted as a scribe for the translation of the Book of Mormon.¹⁴ When this section was first published in the Book of Commandments in 1833, it was described as “a Revelation given to Joseph and Oliver” and was said to have been “translated from parchment, written and hid up by” a figure named John (presumably the beloved disciple).¹⁵ This same description was given when the text was republished in 1835 and 1842 under the supervision of Joseph Smith.¹⁶

This revealed “translation” of John’s record was received, like the Book of Mormon, through divine instruments (the Urim and Thummim).¹⁷ It is important to remember that during this process Joseph Smith “did not have physical possession of the papyrus [of John] he was translating.”¹⁸ In addition, textual analysis of Doctrine and Covenants 7 reveals that

14. “Account of John, April 1829–C [D&C 7],” in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 47–48. For the historical context of this section, see Jeffrey G. Cannon, “Oliver Cowdery’s Gift: D&C 6, 7, 8, 9, 13,” in *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 15–19; and David W. Grua and William V. Smith, “The Tarrying of the Beloved Disciple: The Textual Formation of the Account of John,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 231–61.

15. “Chapter VI,” in *A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ, Organized according to Law, on the 6th of April, 1830* (Independence, Mo.: W. W. Phelps, 1833), 18. In the Manuscript Revelation Book, this section is called a “commandment” and a “revelation” but not explicitly a “translation.” “Revelation Book 1,” in *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, ed. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 15.

16. “Section XXXIII,” in *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints: Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God* (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams and Company, 1835), 160; “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 18 (July 15, 1842): 853. See the observation in Robert J. Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants,” 3 vols. (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1:176.

17. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 15, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/21>.

18. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 21; compare MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 48 n. 129.

CHAPTER VI.

1 *A Revelation given to Joseph and Oliver, in Harmony, Pennsylvania, April, 1829, when they desired to know whether John, the beloved disciple, tarried on earth. Translated from parchment, written and hid up by himself.*

AND the Lord said unto me, John my beloved, what desirest thou? and I said Lord, give unto me power that I may bring souls unto thee.— And the Lord said unto me: Verily, verily I say unto thee, because thou desiredst this, thou shalt tarry till I come in my glory:

SECTION XXXIII.

A Revelation given to Joseph Smith, jr. and Oliver Cowdery, in Harmony, Pennsylvania, April, 1829, when they desired to know whether John, the beloved disciple, tarried on earth.— Translated from parchment, written and hid up by himself.

1 And the Lord said unto me, John, my beloved, what desirest thou? For if ye shall ask, what you will, it shall be granted unto you. And I said unto him, Lord, give unto me power over death, that I may live and bring souls unto thee.

FIGURES 14 AND 15. "Chapter VI," Book of Commandments, 1833 (top), and "Section XXXIII," Doctrine and Covenants, 1835. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The heading to what is today canonized as section 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants in both the 1833 Book of Commandments and the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants identifies this text as both a revelation and a translation.

when this section was republished in the 1835 first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, it had been revised and expanded from its initial form as it appeared in the 1833 Book of Commandments, indicating that expansion and revision could be included in the scope of Joseph's work as a translator.¹⁹

The “New Translation” of the Bible

Another important effort undertaken by Joseph Smith was what he called a “new translation” of the Bible (see D&C 37:1; 45:60–61; 73:3–4; 93:53).²⁰ Undertaken principally between June 1830 and July 1833, this “new translation” of the Bible (today called the Joseph Smith Translation or JST) was not accomplished by the Prophet carefully scrutinizing Hebrew and Greek manuscripts with the aid of a grammar and lexicon, nor even, apparently, by consulting his seer stone or the Urim and Thummim. Rather, Joseph revised the English text of the King James Version of the Bible by inspiration.²¹ That revelation specifically was understood to be Joseph's method in producing this new translation of the Bible is indicated by both evidence from the original JST manuscripts and the recollections of at least one source who claimed to be an eyewitness to the process.²² With language similar to how Joseph Smith described the

19. Grua and Smith, “Tarrying of the Beloved Disciple,” 254–60.

20. “Letter to Church Leaders in Jackson County, Missouri, 25 June 1833,” [1], and “Letter to Church Leaders in Jackson County, Missouri, 2 July 1833,” 52, in *Documents, Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834*, ed. Gerrit J. Dirkmaat and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2014), 154, 167.

21. See Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible—a History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975); Kent P. Jackson, “Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible,” in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 51–76; Kent P. Jackson, “The King James Bible and the Joseph Smith Translation,” in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 197–214; Royal Skousen, “The Earliest Textual Sources for Joseph Smith's ‘New Translation’ of the King James Bible,” *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 451–70; Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon. Part Five: The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2019), 132–40; Jared W. Ludlow, “The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible: Ancient Material Restored or Inspired Commentary? Canonical or Optional? Finished or Unfinished?,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 147–57; and Kent P. Jackson, *Understanding Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2022).

22. Early chapters of the original manuscript of JST Genesis 1–24 are prefaced by scribal notes such as: “A Revelation given to Joseph the Revelator June 1830” (preface to Moses 1), “A Revelation given to the Elders of the Church of Christ On the first Book

translation of the Book of Mormon, a superscription in the original dictated manuscript of JST Matthew explicitly designates the text “A Translation of the New Testament translated by the power of God.”²³

Even though Joseph was revising the English text of the KJV and sometimes revealing entirely new content (such as much of what is today called the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price), he nevertheless called the project a translation. It is possible that part of the process of revising some portions of the text of the JST involved Joseph consulting a popular biblical commentary, although the extent of this influence on the JST is debatable.²⁴ While it is arguable that some of Joseph Smith’s revisions to the KJV Bible convey a more precise reading of the underlying Greek and Hebrew, or that other portions revealed by the Prophet in some way correspond to nonextant ancient manuscripts, a broader view of the types of revisions he made to the Bible suggests that he was doing more with his translation than just rendering ancient languages.²⁵

of Moses” (preface to Moses 2/Genesis 1), “A Revelation concerning Adam after he had been driven out of the garden of Eden” (preface to Moses 5/Genesis 4). See “Old Testament Revision 1,” [1], 3, 8, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/3>. Many years after the project was finished, Orson Pratt recalled witnessing Joseph Smith dictate his revisions to the Bible while under the inspiration of God. “He was inspired of God to translate the Scriptures,” wrote Pratt in 1856, speaking of the JST. Orson Pratt, “Spiritual Gifts” (n.p., 1856), 71. A few years later, Pratt said in a sermon how he “saw [Joseph Smith’s] countenance lighted up as the inspiration of the Holy Ghost rested upon him, dictating the great and most precious revelations now printed for our guide.” Pratt specifically remembered seeing Joseph “translating, by inspiration, the Old and New Testaments, and the inspired book of Abraham from Egyptian papyrus.” Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 7:176 (July 10, 1859). That Pratt mentioned the JST and the Book of Abraham together may be significant in how Joseph Smith’s contemporaries understood and contextualized these two scriptural productions.

23. “New Testament Revision 1,” 1, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/new-testament-revision-1/5>.

24. See Thomas A. Wayment, “Intertextuality and the Purpose of Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible,” in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources*, ed. Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 74–100; Thomas A. Wayment, “Joseph Smith, Adam Clarke, and the Making of a Bible Revision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 46, no. 3 (July 2020): 1–22; and Thomas A. Wayment and Haley Wilson-Lemmon, “A Recovered Resource: The Use of Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary in Joseph Smith’s Bible Translation,” in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 262–84. Kent P. Jackson, “Some Notes on Joseph Smith and Adam Clarke,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 15–60, has critiqued the claim that Joseph Smith relied on Adam Clarke’s commentary. The question of how dependent Joseph Smith may have been on Adam Clarke or other sources remains an open one.

25. Jackson, *Understanding Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible*, 31–37, discusses the types of changes that Joseph Smith appears to have made to the Bible, including

The Record of John (D&C 93:6–18)

Although not typically thought of as a translation since it is embedded in a longer revelation received by the Prophet on May 6, 1833, it could be reasonably argued that the “record of John” in Doctrine and Covenants 93:6–18 is in fact another translated text and should be included among Joseph Smith’s scriptural translation projects.²⁶ Like the Parchment of John (D&C 7), this portion of Doctrine and Covenants 93 quotes a figure named John (once again presumably the beloved disciple, but possibly John the Baptist²⁷) in the first person and promises that “if [readers] are faithful [they] shall receive the fulness of the record of John” (v. 18; compare v. 6). “Section 93 draws on otherwise lost writings of John,” recognizes one scholar. “It is clear that the revelation restores tantalizing lost texts and promises that even more will be forthcoming.”²⁸ Little is known about the circumstances surrounding the reception of this section.²⁹ It is clear that it was received in the context of the Prophet’s work of translating the Bible,³⁰ but it is unknown if Joseph used the seer stone to see and restore (“translate”) these words from John. There is no evidence that Joseph was physically handling any ancient manuscripts when he received this revelation and rendered these words from John. Whatever the case, this “revelation was bold and new, yet also ancient and familiar. As with so many of Joseph Smith’s revelations, it recovered lost truths that were apparently known to biblical figures.”³¹

restoring original text, restoring things said or done but never recorded in the Bible, modernizing the language of the Bible, harmonizing biblical passages with themselves or with modern revelation, and “common sense” revising to correct errors. These are in addition to a number of other possibilities, which include instances of the Prophet, by revelation, giving more precise renderings of the original languages. See also Matthews, “*Plainer Translation*,” 253; and Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 8–11.

26. Nicholas J. Frederick, “Translation, Revelation, and the Hermeneutics of Theological Innovation: Joseph Smith and the Record of John,” in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 304–27.

27. Compare Robert J. Matthews, “Record of John,” in *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 534–35, who makes an argument that the John in this passage is John the Baptist.

28. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 346.

29. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 345.

30. Matthew McBride, “Man Was Also in the Beginning with God: D&C 93,” in McBride and Goldberg, *Revelations in Context*, 192–95.

31. McBride, “Man Was Also in the Beginning with God,” 193.

The Book of Abraham

This brings us to the Book of Abraham, the translation of which must be viewed within the broader context of Joseph Smith's other scriptural translations. When it comes to the nature of the translation of the Book of Abraham, there is not much direct evidence for how Joseph Smith accomplished the work. "No known first-person account from Joseph Smith exists to explain the translation of the Book of Abraham, and the scribes who worked on the project and others who claimed knowledge of the process provided only vague or general reminiscences."³² John Whitmer, then acting as the Church's historian and recorder, commented that "Joseph the Seer saw these Record[s] and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records, . . . which when all translated will be a pleasing history and of great value to the saints."³³ Another important source is Warren Parrish, one of the scribes who assisted Joseph in the production of the Book of Abraham. After his disaffection from the Church in 1837, Parrish reported that in his capacity as Joseph's scribe he "penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks as [Joseph] claimed to receive it by direct inspiration from Heaven."³⁴ Although no longer a believer at the time he composed his letter, Parrish's statement, like Whitmer's, emphasizes that Joseph's claimed method of his "translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks" was revelatory, not academic, but also that the Prophet was still claiming to perform a translation of an ancient language. Unfortunately, Parrish did not elaborate further on the precise nature of this translation "by direct inspiration," although his statement does, intriguingly, echo the language Oliver Cowdery used to describe the translation of the Book of Mormon.³⁵

Other sources reported that the Prophet used the Urim and Thummim or a seer stone in the translation of the Book of Abraham.³⁶ A hostile

32. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xxiii.

33. "John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847," 86.

34. Parrish, letter to the editor of the *Painesville Republican*, [3].

35. "These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the *inspiration* of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated with the *Urim* and *Thummim*, or, as the Nephites would have said, 'interpreters,' the history, or record, called 'The Book of Mormon.'" Oliver Cowdery, "Dear Brother," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 14, emphasis in original.

36. See Jay M. Todd, *The Saga of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 175–77, 219–33; H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Springville, Utah: CFI, 2008), 175–76; and Stephen O.

newspaper, the *Cleveland Whig*, relayed in August 1835, “We are credibly informed that the Mormons have purchased of Mr. Chandler, three of the mummies, which he recently exhibited in this village; and that the prophet Joe has . . . examin[ed] the papyrus through his spectacles,” meaning most likely his seer stone, since there is no evidence that the angel Moroni returned the Urim and Thummim (the Nephite “Interpreters”) to Joseph Smith after 1829. The source named by the *Cleveland Whig* for this claim appears to have been Frederick G. Williams, who was a scribe in the translation of the Book of Abraham, and who, according to the paper, was “travelling about the country” with “this shallow and contemptible story.”³⁷ Because this newspaper’s report is early and names a source close to Joseph Smith, it “should [at least] be taken seriously.”³⁸ But at the same time, because it is thirdhand and hostile, it must be also accepted cautiously. Friendly sources close to Joseph later reported the use of a seer stone in the translation.³⁹ With the exception of Wilford Woodruff, who helped prepare the Book of Abraham for publication in 1842,⁴⁰ these sources were not immediately involved in the production of the text, and in one instance may have been confusing the translation process of the Book of Abraham with the translation process of the Book

Smoot, “Did Joseph Smith Use a Seer Stone in the Translation of the Book of Abraham?,” *Religious Educator* 23, no. 2 (2022): 65–107.

37. “Another Humbug,” *Cleveland Whig*, August 5, 1835, 1. See the discussion in Smoot, “Did Joseph Smith Use a Seer Stone?,” 69–72; and MacKay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones*, 127–28, who suggest the newspaper’s source was actually William W. Phelps, another scribe in the Egyptian project.

38. MacKay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones*, 127.

39. Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1841–December 31, 1842),” [133–34], February 19, 1842, Wilford Woodruff Papers, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/a9d1a2cb-18fe-445d-a5e4-350caaf63442/page/46a50900-b577-4e5c-9fd9-6b2347845fc1>; Parley P. Pratt, “Editorial Remarks,” *Millennial Star* 3, no. 3 (July 1842): 47; M., “Correspondence of the Friends’ Weekly Intelligencer,” *Friends’ Weekly Intelligencer* 3, no. 27 (October 3, 1846): 211; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:65 (August 25, 1878). One of Joseph Smith’s clerks in Nauvoo, Howard Coray, also remembered seeing the Prophet “translate by the Seer’s stone” but did not specify what he saw Joseph translate. Howard Coray to Martha Jane Lewis, August 2, 1889, MS 3047, Church History Catalog, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/becd2d14-e7co-4aa8-b70d-26861581916f/o/o?lang=eng>. Since Coray did not join the Church and become Joseph’s clerk until 1840, he could not have witnessed the translations of the Book of Mormon or the Bible. It would appear that, unless he meant he saw Joseph receive revelation by the seer stone, he witnessed Joseph on at least one occasion in Nauvoo translate a portion of the Egyptian papyri with the seer stone.

40. Smith, Heimburger, and Blythe, *Documents*, Volume 9, 204, 252–54.



FIGURE 16. Seer stone associated with Joseph Smith, long side view. Photograph by Welden C. Andersen and Richard E. Turley Jr. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 17. Replica of Urim and Thummim by Brian Westover. Photograph by Daniel Smith. Courtesy Daniel Smith.

of Mormon.⁴¹ As with the early report in the *Cleveland Whig*, they too should be considered seriously but accepted cautiously. If Joseph did use a seer stone in the translation of the Book of Abraham, this would reinforce the point that the method of translation for the Prophet was unique.

Clues from the Book of Abraham text suggest that the Prophet felt free to continually adapt and revise his initial translation. For example, some of the names of the characters in the Book of Abraham were revised in 1842 shortly before its publication.⁴² Likewise, Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew appears to have also influenced the final form of the text, because his knowledge of such evidently influenced how he either initially rendered or later revised certain words and phrases in the Book of Abraham's creation account.⁴³ One of the glosses at the beginning of

41. The account in the *Friends' Weekly Intelligencer*, cited above, reads thus: "When Joseph was reading the papyrus, he closed his eyes, and held a hat over his face, and that the revelation came to him; and that where the papyrus was torn, he could read the parts that were destroyed equally as well as those that were there; and that scribes sat by him writing, as he expounded." The detail of Joseph placing his face into his hat to read the papyrus sounds much like how witnesses described the translation of the Book of Mormon, suggesting the possibility that the paper misreported or confused which text Lucy Mack Smith was describing. On the other hand, if the *Cleveland Whig* report is accurate and Joseph was indeed examining the papyrus with his seer stone, then perhaps Joseph's translation methods for the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham were more similar than previously supposed. Furthermore, at least two other sources also indicate that Joseph was able to read and translate portions of the papyrus that were damaged. One of these sources mentions how "Smith is to translate the whole by divine inspiration, and that which is lost, like Nebuchadnezzar's dream, can be interpreted as well as that which is preserved" (William S. West, *A Few Interesting Facts Respecting the Mormons* [n.p., 1837], 5), while the other speaks of how the Prophet "translated the characters on the roll, being favored with a 'special revelation' whenever any of the characters were missing by reason of mutilation of the roll" (Frederic G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* 2, no. 6 [August 1880]: 211). These accounts are in harmony with that published in the *Friends' Weekly Intelligencer* but must also be accepted cautiously since they are hearsay.

42. See "Zeptah and Egyptes," 101–6 herein.

43. See Grey, "Word of the Lord in the Original," 249–302; Matthew J. Grey, "Approaching Egyptian Papyri through Biblical Language: Joseph Smith's Use of Hebrew in His Translation of the Book of Abraham," in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 390–451; and Kerry Muhlestein and Megan Hansen, "'The Work of Translating': The Book of Abraham's Translation Chronology," in *Let Us Reason Together: Essays in Honor of the Life's Work of Robert L. Millet*, ed. J. Spencer Fluhman and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2016), 149–53.

the book (“which signifies hieroglyphics”; Abr. 1:14) is not present in the Kirtland-era manuscripts, which appears to indicate that it came from Joseph Smith or one of his scribes at the time of the publication of the text.⁴⁴ Another gloss (“I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record”;⁴⁵ Abr. 1:12) was inserted interlineally, suggesting that “the references to the facsimiles within the text of the Book of Abraham seem to have been nineteenth-century editorial insertions,”⁴⁶ although this is not the only interpretation of this data point.⁴⁷ It should not come as a surprise that Joseph Smith (or his scribes) made revisions to the English text of the Book of Abraham and still called it a translation, since he also revised his revelations that comprise the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon in subsequent editions after their initial publication.⁴⁸

Whatever Joseph’s precise method of scriptural translation, which he specified only as being “by the gift and power of God,” more important is what he produced. As Hugh Nibley recognized, “The Prophet has saved us the trouble of faulting his method by announcing in no uncertain terms that it is a method unique to himself depending entirely on divine revelation. That places the whole thing beyond the reach of direct examination and criticism but leaves wide open the really effective means of testing any method, which is by the results it produces.”⁴⁹ The results of Joseph Smith’s inspired translations are books of scripture that appear beyond his natural ability to produce.

A fuller grasp of this fascinating and important subject therefore includes appreciating how Joseph Smith and other early Latter-day

44. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 334 n. 85.

45. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 195, 239 n. 57.

46. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 143.

47. For an alternative interpretation, see Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 29–32; Kerry Muhlestein, “The Explanation-Defying Book of Abraham,” in Hales, *Reason for Faith*, 82; and 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), 225–26.

48. See Royal Skousen, “Changes in The Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 11 (2014): 161–76; Marlin K. Jensen, “The Joseph Smith Papers: The Manuscript Revelation Books,” *Ensign* 39, no. 7 (July 2009): 47–51; and Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., “Joseph Smith–Era Publications of Revelations,” in *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), xix–xxxvi.

49. Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 63.

Saints used words such as “translation” and “revelation” in ways that are often similar but also sometimes different than how they are typically used today.⁵⁰

Further Reading

- Gee, John. “Joseph Smith and the Papyri.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 13–42. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.
- Matthews, Robert J. “Joseph Smith—Translator.” In *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr., 77–87. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993.
- Muhlestein, Kerry. “Book of Abraham, Translation Of.” In *The Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, 63–69. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.
- . “How Did Joseph Smith Translate the Book of Abraham?” and “What Is the Source of the Book of Abraham?” In *Let’s Talk about the Book of Abraham*, 52–73. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2022.
- Nibley, Hugh. “Translated Correctly?” In *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 51–65. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book;

50. See, for example, Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith—Translator,” in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 77–87; and Richard Lyman Bushman, “Joseph Smith as Translator,” in *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 233–47. Some recent authors have taken a different approach to understanding Joseph Smith’s conception of translation. Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 180–202; and Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith’s Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 193–232, have sought to broaden the definition of “translation” in Joseph Smith’s parlance to effectively equate it with pure revelation, with the end result basically divorcing the text of the Book of Abraham, in this instance, from any relationship with a purported ancient manuscript. For a review and engagement with Givens’s work, see John S. Thompson, “‘We May Not Understand Our Words’: The Book of Abraham and the Concept of Translation in *The Pearl of Greatest Price*,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): 1–48. Along similar lines, Michael Hubbard MacKay, “The Secular Binary of Joseph Smith’s Translations,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 1–39, has written on what he sees is the “incommensurability” of translation in Joseph Smith’s thinking, meaning the process of translation ultimately remains inaccessible and indescribable by conventional means and thereby eludes our full understanding.

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