

Jews in Ancient Egypt

The Egyptian papyri acquired by Joseph Smith in 1835 can be confidently dated to many centuries after Abraham's lifetime. Based on several factors, it can be determined that the papyri were written in a period when Egypt was governed by a dynasty of Greek rulers who reigned from circa 300 to 30 BC.¹ A question that readers of the Book of Abraham might have is how a late copy of Abraham's record originally written sometime around 2,000–1,800 BC could have ended up in the possession of an ancient Egyptian living many centuries later.

One plausible scenario is that Abraham's descendants (ancient Israelites) transmitted the text over the centuries by copying it through succeeding generations in the same way that the books of the Bible were written and copied over many centuries. But the Book of Abraham as translated by Joseph Smith is said to have been preserved on Egyptian papyri recovered "from the catacombs of Egypt" (Book of Abraham heading). If Abraham's descendants transmitted his record, how did it end up in Egypt?

In fact, there is ample evidence that groups of ancient Israelites and other Semitic peoples migrated into Egypt over the course of many centuries, taking with them their culture, religious practices, and sacred texts.² "Abraham himself was in Egypt, as was his great-grandson Joseph

1. 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 Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 3.

2. Joseph M. Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt: From Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995); Alison Salvesen, Sarah Pearce, and

and all of his Israelite descendants for hundreds of years thereafter. After the Exodus, Israelites continued to travel to and live in Egypt. After the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, large groups of Jews settled in Egypt and created longstanding and thriving communities.”³

One of these migrations occurred during the time of the prophet Jeremiah. The Bible records “Judeans living in the land of Egypt, at Migdol, at Tahpanhes, at Memphis, and in the land of Pathros” during this time (Jer. 44:1, NRSV). These Jews had evidently fled into Egypt at the time of the Babylonian conquest of the kingdom of Judah.⁴

Around this time a group of Jewish mercenaries traveled as far south as the island of Elephantine on the Nile and not only established a thriving community but also built a temple to Yahweh (or Jehovah), the God of Israel.⁵ They made copies of biblical texts that have survived today, attesting to the existence of a thriving literary and religious culture in their community.⁶

During the Greco-Roman period of Egyptian history (ca. 330 BC–AD 400), ancient Jews built communities in many parts of Egypt. The city of Alexandria on the coast of the Mediterranean was home to a sizable Jewish community. Other Egyptian sites such as Leontopolis,

Miriam Frenkel, eds., *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2020).

3. 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), 230–31.

4. Jan K. Winnicki, *Late Egypt and Her Neighbors: Foreign Population in Egypt in the First Millennium BC* (Warsaw: Warsaw University, 2009), 180–81.

5. John Merlin Powis Smith, “The Jewish Temple at Elephantine,” *Biblical World* 31, no. 6 (June 1908): 448–59; Bezalel Porten, “The Structure and Orientation of the Jewish Temple at Elephantine: A Revised Plan of the Jewish District,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 81, no. 1 (January–March 1961): 38–42; Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 21–44; Lisbeth S. Fried, *The Priest and the Great King: Temple-Palace Relations in the Persian Empire*, *Biblical and Judaic Studies* 10 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 92–107; Stephen G. Rosenberg, “The Jewish Temple at Elephantine,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67, no. 1 (March 2004): 4–13.

6. Charles F. Nims and Richard C. Steiner, “A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2–6 from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 1 (January–March 1983): 261–74; Karel van der Toorn, “Three Israelite Psalms in an Ancient Egyptian Papyrus,” *Ancient Near East Today* 6, no. 5 (May 2018), <https://www.asor.org/anetoday/2018/05/Three-Israelite-Psalms-Ancient-Egypt>; Karel van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews: Behind the Story of Elephantine* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019), 149–87.

Oxyrynchus, Thebes, and locations in the Fayum likewise had a Jewish presence. In fact, ancient sources indicate that another temple to Yahweh was built at Leontopolis.⁷ Synagogues were likewise built at Alexandria and at sites in the Fayum.⁸

Evidence from surviving textual sources confirms that Jewish names (including names such as Solomon, Aaron, Abraham, and Samuel) proliferated throughout Egypt. Summarizing this evidence, one scholar wrote how “besides the Greeks, Jews were the most numerous group of foreigners living in Egypt” during this time.⁹

There is also clear evidence that these Egyptian Jews copied their sacred texts and even composed new texts while they lived in Egypt. The Old Testament was translated into Greek in Alexandria during this time, and stories about Abraham and other biblical figures circulated among Jews living both inside and outside of Egypt.¹⁰ As has been noted, “the Jews who had been coming into Egypt brought with them their oral and written stories. Esteem for Abraham and stories about him were part of Jewish identity and culture, regardless of where they lived, but it was perhaps especially prominent in Egypt, where Abraham himself had spent some time.”¹¹

So even though Abraham would have written his record many centuries earlier, there is plenty of historical evidence to suggest a plausible way in which those writings could have been transmitted into Egypt at any point over the course of many centuries.

7. M. Delcor and R. de Vaux, “Le Temple D’Onias en Égypte,” *Revue Biblique* 75, no. 2 (April 1968): 188–205; Robert Hayward, “The Jewish Temple at Leontopolis: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Autumn 1982): 429–43.

8. Judith McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt, 300 BC–AD 700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 66, 180–82; Kerry Muhlestein and Courtney Innes, “Synagogues and Cemeteries: Evidence for a Jewish Presence in the Fayum,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 4, no. 2 (2012): 53–59.

9. Winnicki, *Late Egypt and Her Neighbors*, 182.

10. Taylor Halverson, “The Lives of Abraham: Seeing Abraham through the Eyes of Second-Temple Jews,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 253–76; R. Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 1:681–705; E. P. Sanders, “Testament of Abraham,” in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:871–902; Dale C. Allison, *The Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

11. Kerry Muhlestein, *Let’s Talk about the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2022), 15.

Further Reading

- Muhlestein, Kerry, and Courtney Innes. "Synagogues and Cemeteries: Evidence for a Jewish Presence in the Fayum." *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 4, no. 2 (2012): 53–59.
- Nadig, Peter C. "“We Beg You, Our King!”: Some Reflections on the Jews in Persian and Ptolemaic Egypt." In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 83–93. Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2005.
- Smoot, Stephen O., and Kerry Muhlestein. "Prophets, Pagans, and Papyri: The Jews of Greco-Roman Egypt and the Transmission of the Book of Abraham." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2022): 105–34.