

What Egyptian Papyri Did Joseph Smith Possess?

In early July 1835, Joseph Smith acquired some Egyptian papyri from which he claimed to translate the Book of Abraham.¹ From historical evidence and the papyrus fragments that were returned to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in November 1967,² we can piece together a profile of what papyri the Prophet is known to have possessed.

The Book of Breathings of Hor (P. Joseph Smith I, X–XI)³

One of the texts that came into Joseph Smith's ownership was a copy of what is known today as the Book of Breathings—what the ancient Egyptians called the *šꜣyt n sꜣsn*, translated variously as the “Document of Breathing” or “Letter of Fellowship.”⁴ The purpose of this text, which the Egyptians attributed to the goddess Isis (and so was called, in full, “The

1. “History, 1838–1856, Volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838],” 595–96, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/49>; “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704.

2. Jay M. Todd, “Egyptian Papyri Rediscovered,” *Improvement Era* 71, no. 1 (January 1968): 12–16.

3. The numbering for the papyri used in this article follows the numbering used in Jay M. Todd, “New Light on Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papyri,” *Improvement Era* 71, no. 2 (February 1968): 40–49. The papyri can also be viewed online at “Introduction to Egyptian Papyri, circa 300–100 BC,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-egyptian-papyri-circa-300-100-bc/1>.

4. For different arguments on the best translation of the title, see John Gee, “A New Look at the *nh ꜥꜣ* by Formula,” in *Actes du IXe congrès international des études démotiques, Paris, 31 août–3 septembre 2005*, ed. Ghislaine Widmer and Didier Devauchelle (Paris: Institut Français D'Archéologie Orientale, 2009), 136–38; and Foy D. Scalf, “Passports to Eternity: Formulaic Demotic Funerary Texts and the Final Phase of Egyptian Funerary Literature in Roman Egypt” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014), 19–26.

Document of Breathing Made by Isis for Her Brother Osiris”; šꜣyt n sns n ir=n ʾst n sn=s Wsir), “was to provide the deceased with the essential information needed to be resurrected from the dead and attain eternal life with the gods in the hereafter.”⁵ Indeed, as the text itself explicitly says, its purpose was to cause the deceased’s “soul to live, to cause his body to live, to rejuvenate all his limbs . . . again, [so that he might join] the horizon with his father, Re, [to cause his soul to appear in heaven as the disk of the moon, so that his body might shine like Orion in the womb of Nut].”⁶

Today there are thirty-two known surviving copies of the Book of Breathings Made by Isis.⁷ “While all extant copies of the . . . Document of Breathing are very similar, no two are exactly identical.”⁸ The known copies belonged almost exclusively to members of families of the priesthood of Amun-Re at the Karnak Temple in Thebes, “which suggests the text might be particularly associated with that office.”⁹ The copy of this text that Joseph Smith owned belonged anciently to an Egyptian priest named Hor (*Hr*) or Horos (in Greek) and is quite probably the oldest known copy (dating to ca. 200 BC).¹⁰ Thanks to the work of Egyptologists since the rediscovery of the Joseph Smith Papyri, we know quite a bit about Hor and his occupation as a priest that has direct bearing on the Book of Abraham.¹¹

The Book of the Dead of Tshemmin (P. Joseph Smith II–IX)

Another papyrus scroll that came into Joseph Smith’s possession was a text owned anciently by a woman named Tshemmin (or Ta-Sherit-Min;

5. Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2002), 14.

6. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings*, 28, brackets in original; see also Mark Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 462–78.

7. Marc Coenen, “Owners of the Document of Breathings Made by Isis,” *Chronique D’Egypt* 79, no. 157–58 (2004): 61.

8. Marc Coenen, “The Ownership and Dating of Certain Joseph Smith Papyri,” in Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition, P. JS 1–4 and the Hypocephalus of Sheshonq* (Salt Lake City: Smith–Pettit Foundation, 2011), 58.

9. John Gee, “Book of Breathings,” in *The Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 69.

10. 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 II: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 1998), 1103–15; Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings*, 3.

11. See “The Ancient Owners of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 201–5 herein.

t3-šrit-[nt]-Mnw) or Semminis (her Greek name).¹² “Semminis’s scroll contained a Book of the Dead. Originally a very long scroll, it was greatly reduced, and only fragmentary pieces ever reached Joseph Smith.”¹³ This copy of the Book of the Dead dated to probably sometime during the third to second century BC.¹⁴ The Book of the Dead is the name given by modern Egyptologists to a collection of writings called by the ancient Egyptians “Utterances of Coming Forth by Day” (*r3w nw prt hrw*).¹⁵ Among other purposes, this text “served as a protection for the bearer. It describes its purpose as aiding the spirit in becoming exalted, ascending to and descending from the presence of the gods, and appearing as whatever wanted, wherever wanted.”¹⁶ The Book of the Dead was a precursor to the Book of Breathings in the ancient Egyptian funerary tradition, and the latter seems to have generally but not entirely replaced the former beginning in the Greco-Roman period (ca. 330–30 BC). Some of the content and illustrations (or vignettes, as Egyptologists call them) from the Book of the Dead were incorporated into the Book of Breathings, showing a relationship and dependence between the two texts.¹⁷

Although the Book of the Dead is often (and understandably) referred to as a “funerary text,” Egyptologists now recognize that portions of this text were also used in non-funerary settings.¹⁸ For example, the Book of the Dead had a connection to the ancient Egyptian temple that may have significant implications for the Book of Abraham and for

12. Michael D. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 5.

13. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 76.

14. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 7.

15. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 1. For an accessible overview of the Book of the Dead, consult Foy Scalf, ed., *Book of the Dead: Becoming God in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: Oriental Institute Museum Publications, 2017).

16. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 76.

17. Marc Coenen, “An Introduction to the Document of Breathing Made by Isis,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 49 (1998): 37–45; Marc Coenen, “On the Demise of the Book of the Dead in Ptolemaic Thebes,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 52 (2001): 69–84.

18. John Gee, “The Use of the Daily Temple Liturgy in the Book of the Dead,” in *Totenbuch—Forschungen: Gesammelte Beiträge des 2. Internationalen Totenbuch—Symposiums, Bonn, 25. bis 29. September 2005*, ed. Burkhard Backes, Irmtraut Munro, and Simone Stöhr (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 73–86; Alexandra von Lieven, “Book of the Dead, Book of the Living: BD Spells as Temple Texts,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 98 (2012): 258–59; Giuseppina Lenzo, “Rituals in the Spells of the Book of the Dead in Ancient Egypt,” in *Text and Ritual in the Pentateuch: A Systematic and Comparative Approach*, ed. Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania University Press and Eisenbrauns, 2021), 30–57.

the Latter-day Saint temple endowment.¹⁹ “The sections of Semminis’s Book of the Dead in the Joseph Smith Papyri cover part of the introductory chapter, some of the texts dealing with Semminis’s being able to appear as various birds or animals, texts allowing her to board the boat of the supreme god and meet with the council of the gods, texts providing her with food and other good things and making her happy, and a text asserting her worthiness to enter into the divine presence.”²⁰

Previous scholarship on the Joseph Smith Papyri identified P. Joseph Smith IIIa–b as belonging to a woman by the name of Neferirnub (*nfr-ir-nbw*).²¹ It was supposed that the female owner of this papyrus fragment, which “shows the deceased standing before [the god] Osiris with her heart being weighed in scales,”²² was someone other than Tshemmin and that therefore Joseph Smith possessed two different copies of the Book of the Dead belonging to two different women. As was demonstrated in 2019, however, Neferirnub was a nickname for Tshemmin, and thus, the two were the same woman. P. Joseph Smith II, IV–IX and P. Joseph Smith IIIa–b belonged to the same scroll.²³

The portion of the Book of the Dead previously assigned as P. Joseph Smith IIIa–b, commonly designated Spell or Chapter 125 by Egyptologists, was being used in Egyptian temples by the time of the creation of the Joseph Smith Papyri.²⁴ It was also being used in the initiation and purification rituals of Egyptian priests.²⁵ Interestingly, in 1835 Oliver

19. See Hugh W. Nibley, *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); and Stephen O. Smoot and Quinten Barney, “The Book of the Dead as a Temple Text and the Implications for the Book of Abraham,” in *The Temple: Ancient and Restored*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry, Temple on Mount Zion Series 3 (Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2016), 183–209.

20. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 76.

21. See, for example, Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 57–59; and Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 205–7.

22. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 57.

23. Malcom Mosher Jr., “New Light on P. Joseph Smith 2 and 3,” in *The Book of the Dead, Saite through Ptolemaic Periods: Essays on Books of the Dead and Related Topics*, ed. Malcolm Mosher Jr. (Prescott, Ariz.: SPBDStudies, 2019), 299–312. Note how Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 57–67, 73–81, anticipated Mosher’s own conclusions.

24. Von Lieven, “Book of the Dead, Book of the Living,” 263–64.

25. Robert K. Ritner, “Book of the Dead 125,” in *The Context of Scripture: Volume II, Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 59–60; John Gee, “Prophets, Initiation, and the Egyptian Temple,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 31 (2004): 101–2.

Cowdery described the scene portrayed in this fragment as the judgment of the dead.²⁶

The Scroll of Amenhotep (“Valuable Discovery”)²⁷

Another papyrus roll that Joseph Smith owned belonged to a man named Amenhotep (*Imn-ḥtp*).²⁸ Unfortunately, the original papyrus containing this text is not extant. It is only known from a nineteenth-century copy in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery and appears, based on the reading of one Egyptologist, to be portions of a copy of the Book of the Dead.²⁹ Because only a few lines of hieratic Egyptian characters were copied (enough to give us the name of the owner of the papyrus and perhaps a sense of what it contained, but not much more), the dating of this papyrus is unknown.

The Hypocephalus of Sheshonq (Facsimile 2)

Finally, Joseph Smith owned a hypocephalus that anciently belonged to a man named Sheshonq or Shishak (*ššḳ*).³⁰ This hypocephalus was published on March 15, 1842, in the *Times and Seasons* as Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham.³¹ Unfortunately, the original hypocephalus is not extant. However, because this type of document is rare and belonged primarily to a select group of Egyptian priests and their family members, we can date Sheshonq’s hypocephalus to sometime during the Ptolemaic

26. Oliver Cowdery, “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 3 (December 1835): 236.

27. See 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), 27–41.

28. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 10–13; Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 209–13.

29. Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 209, misleadingly describes the document as Joseph Smith’s “hand copy.” In fact, besides his signature on the front cover, Joseph Smith’s handwriting does not appear in the “Valuable Discovery” notebook. The English text is in the hand of Oliver Cowdery, and, in the judgment of Jensen and Hauglid, it is “likely” that so are the hieratic characters. See Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 27.

30. Michael D. Rhodes, “A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 260–62; Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” FARMS Preliminary Report (1997). See “The Purpose and Function of the Egyptian Hypocephalus,” 234–46 herein.

31. “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): [721].

Period (ca. the fourth to third centuries BC).³² The significance and purpose of the ancient Egyptian hypocephalus is described elsewhere in this volume.³³

It should be remembered that this Egyptian material is what we currently *know* Joseph Smith possessed. It is possible, and indeed likely, that Joseph Smith possessed more papyri than have survived. Eyewitness accounts of those who viewed the papyri during Joseph Smith's lifetime suggest a substantial portion of papyri is no longer extant.³⁴ What may have been contained on the portion of missing papyrus (including, potentially, a copy of what modern readers would identify as the Book of Abraham) and exactly how much papyrus is missing are open questions that scholars are still investigating and debating.³⁵

Further Reading

Gee, John. "The Contents of the Joseph Smith Papyri." In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 73–81. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

Rhodes, Michael D. *Books of the Dead Belonging to Thsemmin and Nefer-irrub: A Translation and Commentary*. Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010.

———. *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2002.

32. Tamás Mekis, *The Hypocephalus: An Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 2, 208.

33. See "The Purpose and Function of the Egyptian Hypocephalus," 234–46 herein.

34. See the discussion in John Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri," 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), 175–217; and Kerry Muhlestein, "Papyri and Presumptions: A Careful Examination of the Eyewitness Accounts Associated with the Joseph Smith Papyri," *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 4 (2016): 31–50.

35. For different perspectives and arguments on the subject of how much papyri is missing and what was potentially contained thereon, see John Gee, "Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri," *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 117–23; Andrew W. Cook and Christopher C. Smith, "The Original Length of the Scroll of Hôr," *Dialogue* 43, no. 4 (2010): 1–42; John Gee, "Formulas and Faith," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 1 (2012): 60–65; and Christopher C. Smith, "'That Which Is Lost': Assessing the State of Preservation of the Joseph Smith Papyri," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 69–83.



FIGURES 1 AND 2. P. Joseph Smith I (*top*) and XI, fragments of the Book of Breathing of Horos, ca. 238–153 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 3. P. Joseph Smith X, fragment of the Book of Breathings of Horos, ca. 238–153 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 4. P. Joseph Smith II, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

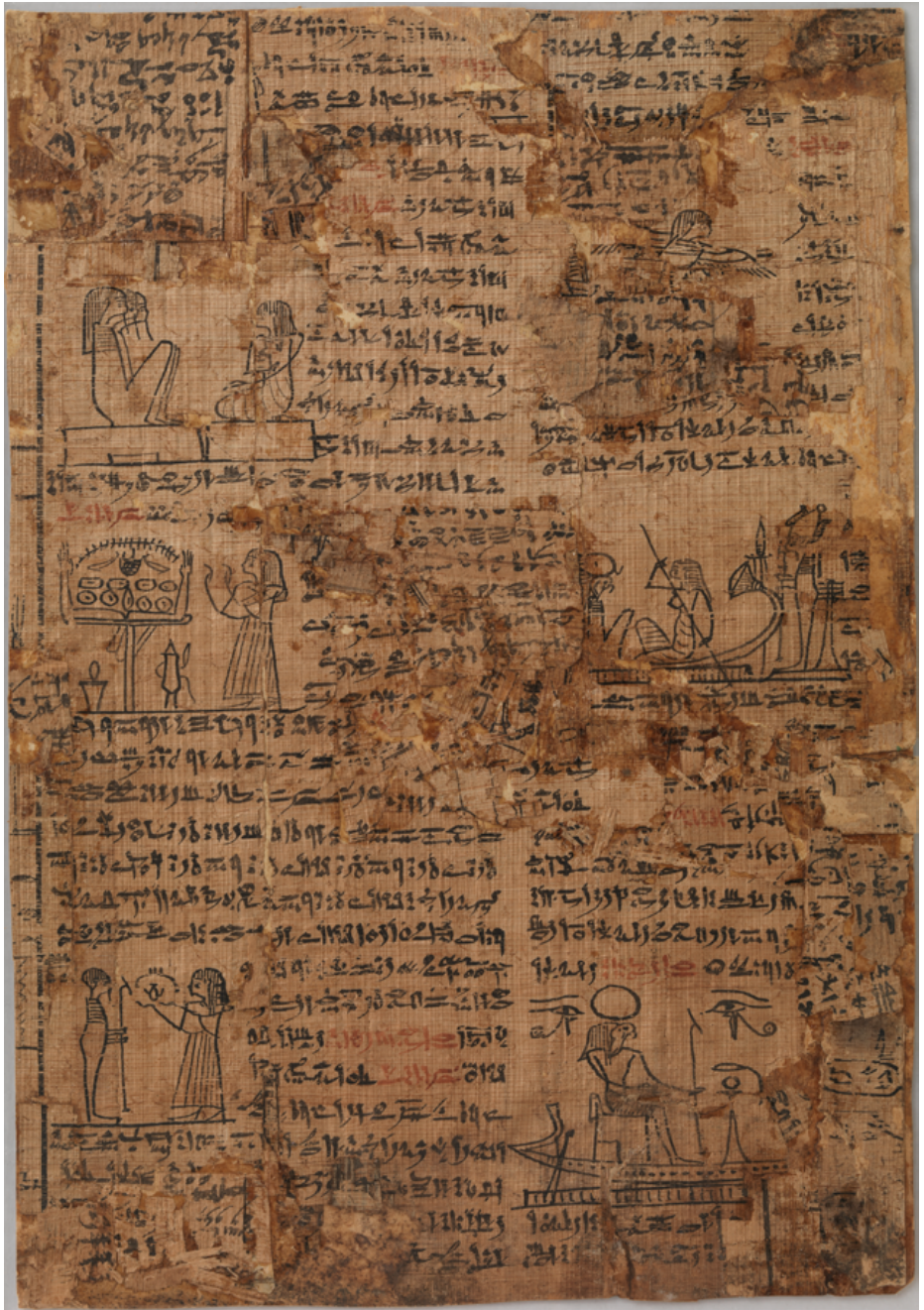


FIGURE 5. P. Joseph Smith IV, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 6. P. Joseph Smith V-VI, fragments of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 7. P. Joseph Smith VII, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC.
 © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

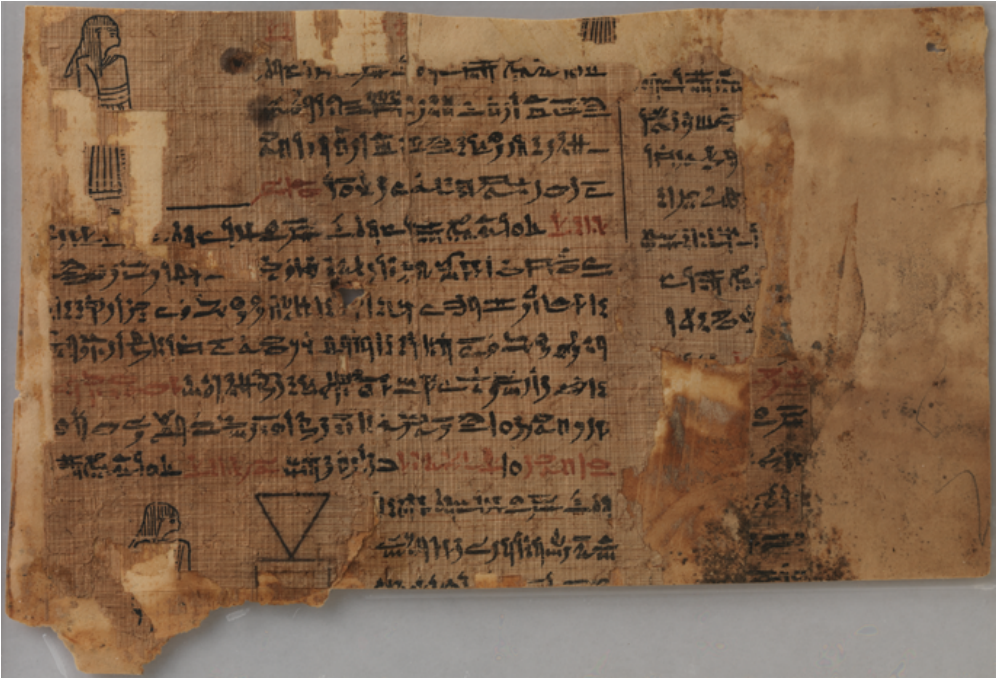


FIGURE 8. P. Joseph Smith VIII, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

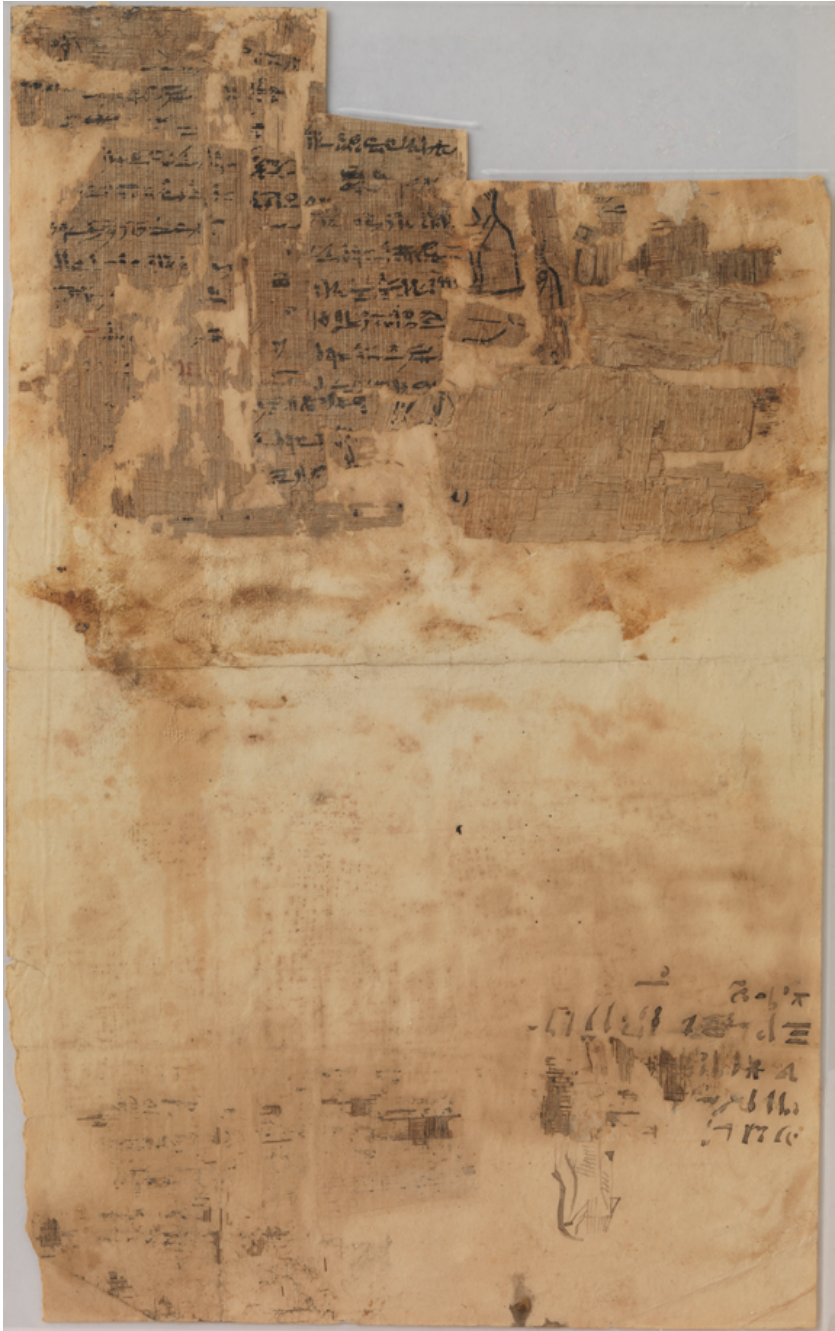
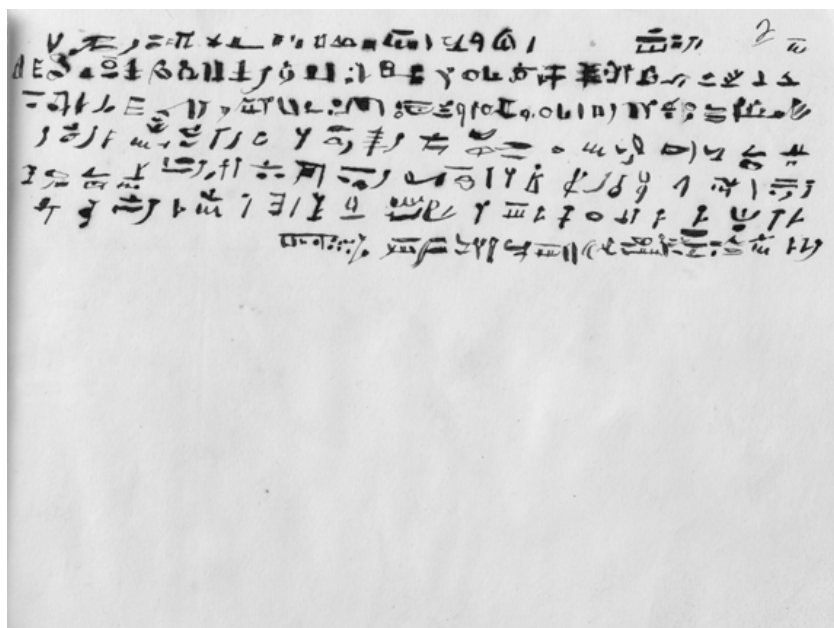
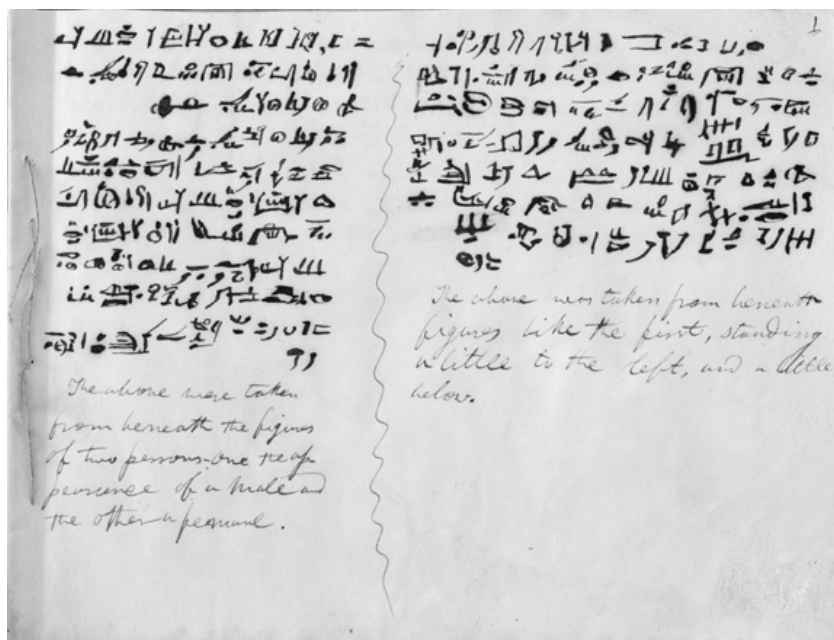


FIGURE 9. P. Joseph Smith IX, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 10. P. Joseph Smith IIIa–b, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Neferirnebu/Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURES 11 AND 12. "Valuable Discovery" (front and back of page), ca. early July 1835, copy of hieratic characters from the Book of the Dead of Amenhotep, date unknown. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

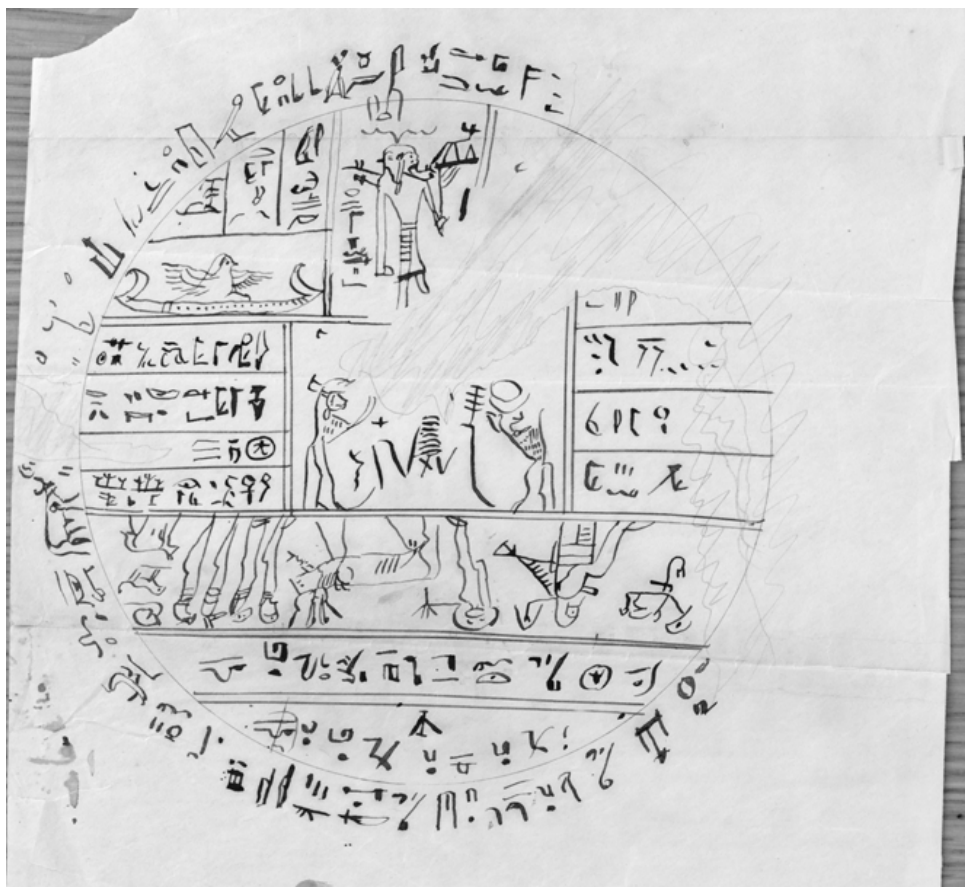


FIGURE 13. Hypocephalus of Sheshonq, ca. 300–200 BC, copied between ca. July 1835 and ca. March 1842. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.