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 šȝr n sdsn, 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

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.
Document of Breathing Made by Isis for Her Brother Osiris”; ṣḥyt n snsn ir-n ‘ıst 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 (Ḥr) 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 Tšemmin (P. Joseph Smith II–IX)

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

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.
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t3-śrit-[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

the Latter-day Saint temple endowment. “The sections of Semminis’s
Book of the Dead in the Joseph Smith Papyri cover part of the introd-
cutory 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 provid-
ing her with food and other good things and making her happy, and a
text asserting her worthiness to enter into the divine presence.”

Previous scholarship on the Joseph Smith Papyri identified P. Joseph
Smith IIIa–b as belonging to a woman by the name of Neferirrnub (nfr-
ir-nbw). It was supposed that the female owner of this papyrus frag-
ment, which “shows the deceased standing before [the god] Osiris with
her heart being weighed in scales,” was someone other than Tshem-
min and that therefore Joseph Smith possessed two different copies of
the Book of the Dead belonging to two different women. As was dem-
onstrated 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.

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

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19. See Hugh W. Nibley, The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endow-
ment, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo,
Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young Univer-
sity, 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.


21. See, for example, Rhodes, Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferir-
nub, 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,
Introduction to the Book of Abraham, 57–67, 73–81, anticipated Mosher’s own conclusions.


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
101–2.
Cowdery described the scene portrayed in this fragment as the judgment of the dead.  

**The Scroll of Amenhotep ("Valuable Discovery")**  

Another papyrus roll that Joseph Smith owned belonged to a man named Amenhotep (*Imn-ḥtp*). 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. 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 (*ššḥk*). This hypocephalus was published on March 15, 1842, in the *Times and Seasons* as Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham. 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

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

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. 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.

Further Reading


Figures 1 and 2. P. Joseph Smith I (top) and XI, fragments 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 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.
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.