

According to Mormon writers, the “Book of Abraham” was supposed to have been written on papyrus by Abraham about 4,000 years ago. This very same papyrus, it is claimed, was acquired by Joseph Smith in 1835. Smith translated the papyrus and published it under the title, “The Book of Abraham.” It was accepted by the Mormon Church as Scripture and is now published as part of the *Pearl of Great Price*—one of the four standard works of the church.

For many years Joseph Smith’s collection of papyri was lost, but on Nov. 27, 1967, the Mormon-owned *Deseret News* announced that the “collection of pa[p]yrus manuscripts, long believed to have been destroyed in the Chicago fire of 1871, was presented to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints here Monday by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.”

The importance of this find cannot be overemphasized, for now Joseph Smith’s ability as a translator of ancient Egyptian writing can be put to an absolute test. When the papyri were located many members of the church felt that Joseph Smith’s work would be vindicated. As it turned out, however, within six months from the time the Metropolitan Museum gave the papyri to the church, the Book of Abraham had been proven untrue! The fall of the Book of Abraham was brought about by the identification of the actual fragment of papyrus from which Joseph Smith “translated” the Book of Abraham. This was made possible by comparing it with the handwritten manuscripts. Dr. James R. Clark, of Brigham Young University, gave this information:

... there are in existence today in the Church Historian’s Office what seem to be two separate manuscripts of Joseph

Smith’s translations from the papyrus rolls. . . . One manuscript is the Alphabet and Grammar. . . . Within this Alphabet and Grammar there is a copy of the characters, together with their translation of Abraham 1:4-28. . . . (*The Story of the Pearl of Great Price*, 1962, pp. 172-73)

In the publication, *Pearl of Great Price Conference*, Dec. 10, 1960, 1964 ed., pp. 60-61, Dr. Clark referred to a longer manuscript:

I have in my possession a photostatic copy of the manuscript of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s translation of Abraham 1:1 to 2:18. . . . The characters from which our present book of Abraham was translated are down the left-hand column and Joseph Smith’s translation opposite, so we know approximately how much material was translated from each character.

All of the first two rows of characters on the papyrus fragment can be found in the manuscript of the Book of Abraham that is published in *Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar*. On the cover of this tract is a photograph of the original fragment of papyrus from which Joseph Smith was supposed to have translated the Book of Abraham. A careful examination of the original manuscripts in the handwriting of Joseph Smith’s scribes reveals that Smith used less than four lines from this papyrus to make forty-nine verses in the book of Abraham. These forty-nine verses are composed of more than 2,000 English words!

Klaus Baer, an Egyptologist at the University of Chicago, concluded concerning the “Sensen” fragment: “Joseph Smith thought that this papyrus contained the Book of Abraham.” (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1968, p. 111) Although the noted Mormon apologist Dr. Hugh Nibley later proposed some fantastic

theories in an attempt to divorce the Egyptian papyri from the Book of Abraham, at a meeting held at the University of Utah on May 20, 1968, he frankly spoke of

the fact that, the very definite fact that, one of the fragments seemed to supply all of the symbols for the Book of Abraham. This was the little “Sensen” scroll.

When Egyptologists translated this piece of papyrus, they found that it contained absolutely nothing concerning Abraham. Instead, it turned out to be a pagan funerary text known as the “Book of Breathings,” a work which actually evolved from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The Book of Breathings did not come into existence until the later stages of Egyptian history—just a few centuries before the time of Christ. Like the Book of the Dead, it was buried with those who died in ancient Egypt. It is filled with magic and pagan gods. It was obviously written by a very superstitious people, and is quite different from the religion taught in the Bible.

The fact that the papyrus Joseph Smith used as the basis for his Book of Abraham is in reality the Book of Breathings cannot be disputed because the name “Book of Breathings” appears clearly on the fourth line of the fragment. In 1968 two Egyptologists from the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute, Professors John A. Wilson and Klaus Baer, identified the papyrus as the “Book of Breathings.” A translation by Klaus Baer was printed in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1968, pp. 119-20. Professor Richard A. Parker, Chairman of the Department of Egyptology at Brown University also translated the papyrus. Professor Hugh Nibley stated that “Parker is the best man in America for this particular

period and style of writing” Professor Parker’s translation reads as follows:

1. [.....] this great pool of Khonsu
2. [Osiris Hor, justified], born of Taykhebyt, a man likewise.
3. After (his) two arms are [fast]ened to his breast, one wraps the Book of Breathings, which is
4. with writing both inside and outside of it, with royal linen, it being placed (at) his left arm
5. near his heart, this having been done at his
6. wrapping and outside it. If this book be recited for him, then
7. he will breath like the soul[s of the gods] for ever and
8. ever.

(*Dialogue A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Summer 1968, p. 98)

Except for a few minor variations, other renditions of the text are in agreement with Professor Parker’s. The Book of Abraham, therefore, has been proven to be a spurious translation. Egyptologists find no mention of either Abraham or his religion in this text. The average number of words that the Egyptologist used to convey the message in this text is eighty-seven, whereas Joseph Smith’s rendition contains thousands of words. In one case Joseph Smith derived 177 English words out of the word “*Khon*”—the name of an Egyptian moon god! It is impossible to escape the conclusion that the Book of Abraham is a product of Joseph Smith’s imagination.

Since the original papyrus contains nothing about Abraham, some Mormon apologists have suggested that Joseph Smith may have obtained the Book of Abraham by way of direct revelation and not from the papyrus. Those who try to use this escape will find themselves trapped by the words

of Joseph Smith himself. At the beginning of the handwritten manuscript, Joseph Smith asserted that it was a “**Translation** of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand **upon papyrus** and found in the catacombs of Egypt.” The introduction to the Book of Abraham still maintains that it was “**Translated From The Papyrus**, By Joseph Smith” (*Pearl of Great Price*, The Book of Abraham, Introduction). If the Book of Abraham is not an actual translation of the papyrus, then it is obvious that the introduction to it that appears in the *Pearl of Great Price* is a complete misrepresentation. Joseph Smith not only claimed that he translated it from the papyrus, but according to the *History of the Church*, vol. 2, p. 351, he affirmed that it was “**a correct translation.**”

The contents of the Book of Breathings are certainly foreign to the teachings concerning Abraham found in the Bible. The Bible says he rejected paganism, whereas the Book of Breathings is filled with pagan gods and practices. The names of at least fifteen Egyptian gods or goddesses are mentioned on the “Sensen” papyri which Joseph Smith had in his possession, but there is not one word about Abraham.

The Mormon leaders face a serious dilemma. They cannot repudiate the Book of Abraham without raising the question of Joseph Smith’s ability to “translate” the Book of Mormon.

For more information on the Book of Abraham and many other subjects see the book, *Major Problems of Mormonism*, available from Utah Lighthouse Ministry.

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Fall of the Book of Abraham

