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Book of Abraham Concerns

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Chapter 5

Book of Abraham Concerns

21) *When Joseph Smith first published the Book of Abraham in the Times and Seasons he said that the ensuing text was a “translation of some ancient records... purporting to be the writings of Abraham... written by his own hand, upon papyrus.” Having examined the papyri, however, scholars claim that it was written in 1st century BC, nearly 2,000 years after Abraham could have written it.*

Answer: There is a difference between the date when a text is written and the date when a manuscript is published or produced. Every copy we have of any book in the Bible was actually originally written well before the date of the manuscript on which they were copied. If you buy the book *A Christmas Carol* you should be pretty confident that the book was written by Charles Dickens. Now was the book in your possession actually written by Charles Dickens, or was the original story written by Charles Dickens? Obviously, some modern editor put Dickens’ story into a modern format to be published in a book you just purchased at your local bookstore, but the story was still written by Charles Dickens—even by “his own hand.”

22) *Egyptologists say that the surviving Book of Abraham Papyri have nothing to do with Abraham and are instead, common Egyptian funeral texts.*

Answer: This issue is one of the enormously complex topics that can’t be answered in a brief response—or even in a multitude of books. Some background info is necessary to make sense of what’s going on and why someone would claim it proves that Joseph Smith was a fraud.

Joseph Smith acquired several ancient Egyptian scrolls. As Joseph translated the papyri he claimed that they contained (at least in part) teachings of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham. In all likelihood (and there is some testimony witness to support this) Joseph Smith used the seer stone to “translate” the Book of Abraham. You’ll notice that I put translate in quotation marks—Joseph Smith couldn’t read Egyptian any more than he could read reformed Egyptian.

When we say translate today, we refer to the process of reworking the writings of one language into another language by someone who intimately knows both languages. That’s not how Joseph Smith did *any* of his translating. His conversion from an ancient language into English was accomplished by means of receiving revelatory thoughts in his own version of English (his “language”—see D&C 1:24) and dictating those to a scribe. He probably had to choose words that closely approximated what ideas he was receiving by revelation.

Some of his English translations of the papyri were eventually compiled into scripture as the Book of Abraham (we don’t know what happened to everything he translated from the papyri—but a good portion of it has disappeared).

Many years after Joseph Smith’s death the scrolls went different directions and a huge

percentage of the total number of papyri were burned in the Chicago fire of 1871. Among the few surviving scrolls was one known as a Book of Breathing (or Breathing Permit) written for a deceased man by the name of Hor (or Horus). The Breathing Permit was a funerary text, pretty much like other Breathing Permits that were frequently included with the mummies at burial. This particular scroll contains a graphic that became Facsimile 1 in our Book of Abraham.

Here's where the problems start. A) According to Abraham 1:12, Abraham refers the reader to the graphic (Facsimile 1) at the commencement of "this record"—suggesting that the graphic should be on the same papyri as the text for the Book of Abraham. Trouble is, as the critics note, the surviving parts of the scroll (which includes most of the graphic for Facsimile 1) have nothing to do with Abraham.

B) There's a collection of early nineteenth century LDS documents known as the Kirtland Egyptian Papers (KEP). The papers were produced by Joseph Smith and his scribes. We don't fully know what they were all about but they have some obvious connection with the Book of Abraham and the translation of the papyri. The papers are primarily in the handwriting of a few of Joseph Smith's scribes and there is debate on how they were produced. Did Joseph Smith read (by revelation) the papyri while dictating to the scribes, or are they worksheets wherein Joseph and his scribes tried to figure out an Egyptian alphabet? This they might have done based on an examination of the Egyptian characters and an original (now lost) copy of the Book of Abraham that was dictated previously by revelation.

The problem with the KEP is that they contain the exact same Egyptian characters that we find on the Horus papyrus adjacent to the Facsimile 1. Next to the copies of the Egyptian characters are English "translations" which seem to be an attempt to translate the Egyptian characters. These English "translations," however, have absolutely nothing to do with the characters from which they seem to have been translated.

So what's going on? The critics, of course, claim that it's a slam dunk against Joseph Smith. He tried to translate Egyptian characters and failed miserably—creating, instead, the fictional Book of Abraham. That's an easy scenario, but there are other options. I'll give you one big-picture option with some variations.

Quite often Egyptian scrolls contained appendages to the original material. The Horus scroll might have been much longer (and the debate is still out on measurements which might settle the issue). It's possible that the Horus scroll with the graphic for Facsimile 1 *was* at the beginning of an overall record but the part containing the Book of Abraham has disappeared. Not only might the scroll have been longer than what we now have, but sometimes the Egyptians wrote on both sides of scrolls.

Perhaps the textual part for the Book of Abraham was on the back side of the missing part of the scroll. If you've ever lost pieces to a puzzle you know that you can assemble the puzzle and guess what should have been in the lacuna (the missing area). If the puzzle depicts a familiar scene or picture it's easier to guess what's missing than if it depicts an unfamiliar scene or picture. With the latter, it's difficult to know what is missing with any certainty.

The Egyptians frequently put associated graphics and texts on different and separate scrolls. The graphics were, therefore, put on scrolls with texts that had nothing to do with the graphics. In other words, the original Book of Abraham *text* scroll could have disappeared but the graphic survived on the scroll of Horus.

As noted above, Joseph Smith couldn't translate in the normal sense of the word. When he translated the Book of Mormon plates he wasn't even looking at the plates. He would have no idea what part of a scroll—or even which scroll—might have contained the Book of Abraham text. The comment attributed to Abraham: “I refer you to the graphic at the commencement of this record” could have been Joseph Smith's editorial comment. The graphic for Facsimile 1 was easily identifiable and it would have made perfect sense that the text next to the graphic belonged to the graphic.

These explanations help us to understand some possibilities with the KEP. If you had pointed to a reformed Egyptian character on the Book of Mormon plates, Joseph Smith would probably have had no idea what the character represented. He might have thought he could read the text, and could, theoretically, receive an English Book of Mormon paragraph while putting his finger on a line of Reformed Egyptian characters—characters that were perhaps unrelated to the English translation in his seer stone.

It's possible that he tried to include some “study it out with your mind” during the Book of Abraham translation. With the Book of Mormon plates he was forbidden from showing them to others. With the papyri, he had not such restriction. By now Joseph Smith and other LDS leaders had taken some courses on Hebrew and correctly assumed that Egyptians also read from right to left instead of left to right as we find in English. Assuming that the Book of Abraham text was adjacent to the facsimile, Joseph Smith and his scribes might have made the translation process a group project.

Perhaps they noted and recorded an Egyptian character (or tried to break it down into something that represented many characters) then waited for Joseph Smith to read off the “translation” he saw in the seer stone. God was revealing the Book of Abraham all right, but God wasn't responsible for what these men thought was the character source for each English translation that Joseph Smith dictated. God wanted Joseph Smith and the world to have the scriptural text; He wasn't trying to help Joseph Smith set up a scholarly Egyptian Alphabet—that was their own doing.

While it may seem strange to think that Joseph Smith could receive a revealed translation of an ancient text that might not have been in his hands during the translation process, we could point to other instances where this exact thing happened. When Joseph “translated” the Bible for the JST, for example, he didn't have any original Bible manuscripts in his hands. Likewise, when he dictated the Book of Moses, the text was revealed without so much as a hint of Joseph having access to an ancient document. Section 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants was translated from an ancient parchment written by the Apostle John. Did Joseph have the parchment in his hand? Nope, he saw it in revelation.

This realization opens the door for one or more options in understanding the Book of

Abraham. The Book of Abraham text document may have been in Joseph's possession, but it need not have been so. Maybe there was no Book of Abraham text on the scrolls at all. Joseph Smith wouldn't know. God could have used the papyri and Joseph Smith's "language" as catalysts to open Joseph Smith's mind to receiving revelation of what was once on a preexisting Book of Abraham text. Or maybe the Book of Abraham text was on some other scroll, part of which might have been in Joseph's possession, or part of which might not have made it to Joseph's hands.

The interesting thing about the English scripture known as the Book of Abraham is that it *really does* have some very compelling ties to authentic ancient Old World traditions about Abraham—traditions that were unknown (or virtually unknown) in Joseph Smith's day. In other words, the translation appears to be based on a real ancient Abrahamic text, even if we don't know the particulars as to how those traditions were revealed to Joseph Smith or what relationship they have to the Joseph Smith Papyri.

While the critics claim that the interpretations of the graphics in the different facsimiles don't match what Egyptologists claim they represent, the fact is that A) Joseph Smith is surprisingly accurate on at least a few of the interpretations, and B) some of those graphics might have been repurposed by 2nd century Jews to mean something else. The Egyptian God Isis, for example, was represented as Abraham in early Jewish literature. So while critics claim that Joseph was wrong in referring to figures in the Egyptian facsimile as "Abraham" Joseph would have been spot on in his claim if he was a Jew in the period when the papyri were created.

Symbols, graphics, and figures don't mean anything by themselves. They only mean something in the context of a cultural understanding. The hook cross symbol, commonly called the swastika, has been utilized by various cultures since Neolithic times. The symbol has been used in Indian religions for centuries and is still considered to be a sacred symbol. In the early 20th century the symbol was repurposed by the Nazi's.

The meaning and interpretation of graphical symbols have changed through the years depending on the culture who adapted the graphic. The same thing could have happened with the Book of Abraham facsimiles. This claim isn't as far-fetched as critics would like you to think. There is evidence that interpretations based on a 2nd century Jewish repurposing of the Book of Abraham facsimiles would have produced some striking similarities to what we find in the descriptions given in Joseph's translation of the Book of Abraham.

23) The Book of Abraham teaches a Newtonian view of the universe (which is what was believed—incorrectly—in Joseph Smith's day).

Answer: Actually, the Book of Abraham teaches a geocentric view of the universe (a universe with the earth at the center). This is what *ancient* people would have believed and it is not what was believed in Joseph Smith's day. The fact that the Book of Abraham does *not* teach a Newtonian view of the universe—which is what was believed in Joseph Smith's day—is evidence in favor of the proposition that the book was translated from an ancient text.

24) *The overwhelming majority of the Book of Abraham text simply repeats (quotes, or paraphrases) what's already in the Old Testament—and uses King James wording.*

Answer: So? (See #1 above for KJV English.) The Book of Abraham tells a story about a character already known to us in the Bible—Abraham. All ancient religious stories about Abraham will tell a lot of the same stuff—they are often copies of copies, or copies of older legends or oral traditions. We would be surprised if the story was materially different—that would suggest that Joseph made it up. Instead, it contains much of what we find in the Bible but with additions *not* found in the Bible—additions, I might add, that are attested in other ancient documents about Abraham.

25) *Anachronisms: The facsimiles would not have existed in Abraham's day.*

Answer: Wonder Bread didn't exist in Jesus' day either but that doesn't mean that eating it during the sacrament means that Jesus didn't exist. All people adapt teachings and ideas to “their language”—to symbols that are relevant for their time and location. Most American artworks depicting Jesus illustrate a man of European descent who often lives in a very European-looking world. Do such art depictions mean that Jesus didn't exist? It's possible (as discussed in #22) that the Egyptian facsimiles were repurposed by 2nd century Jews to express ideas about Abraham. There is historical precedent for Jews adapting Egyptian symbols to teach Jewish traditions.

26) *Contrary to what we know from science, the Book of Abraham claims that the Sun gets its light from Kolob.*

Answer: This is answered in query #1. God taught Abraham in the “language” of his day—from within a framework of his cultural perceptions and worldview. He did the same thing to those who recorded Genesis—God didn't give them advanced scientific ideas, but rather shared information about who they are in relationship to each other, the world, and most importantly to God. This information was shared in a vessel of a worldview and cosmology that they already understood (even though it doesn't square with modern science and 21st century cosmology).

27) *The Philosophy of the Future State (printed in 1829 and owned by Joseph Smith) makes claims that are likewise made in the Book of Abraham.*

Answer: First, we don't know when Joseph acquired the book. We know that in 1844 he donated his copy to the Nauvoo Library. Owning it in 1844 doesn't mean he read it in 1830—that's an *assumption*. Even if he had read it, however, many of the topics in the book were already being promoted as common Protestant ideas, and a number of the things in the book directly contradict some of the teachings in the Book of Abraham.

28) *The Church doesn't know how to respond to the Book of Abraham problems and now concedes that the Book of Abraham text doesn't match Egyptian translations.*

Answer: The Lord doesn't typically tell us how miracles are performed. Do we know how the Red Sea was parted, how water was turned to wine, how God revealed the 10 commandments, or how Jesus rose from the dead?

We know we have revelation given to Joseph regarding the Abraham of the Bible. Somehow the papyri played a role in this revelation. Was the Book of Abraham text on the missing pieces of papyri? Did the drawings on the Papyri open Joseph's mind to receive a revelation about a lost document about Abraham (ala the Book of Moses), or was something else happening? We don't know. The Lord hasn't revealed it. The Lord doesn't care about the papyri; He cares about the story of Abraham and the teachings which the story restored, and He somehow managed to open Joseph's mind so he could receive this information.