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THE JOSEPH SMITH PAPERS AND THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM: A RESPONSE TO RECENT REVIEWS

Matthew J. Grow and Matthew C. Godfrey

Abstract: *The Joseph Smith Papers welcomes engagement with its work and gratefully acknowledges the important work of various scholars on the Book of Abraham. Recent reviews in the Interpreter of Revelations and Translations, Volume 4, however, significantly misunderstand the purposes and conventions of the project. This response corrects some of those misconceptions, including the idea that the transcript is riddled with errors and the idea that personal agendas drive the analysis in the volume. The complex history of the Book of Abraham can be understood through multiple faithful perspectives, and the Joseph Smith Papers Project affirms the value of robust, respectful, and professional dialogue about our shared history.*

[**Editor’s note:** We are pleased to present this response to two recent book reviews in the pages of *Interpreter*. Consistent with practice in many academic journals, we are also publishing rejoinders from the review authors, immediately following this response.]

The *Interpreter* recently published two reviews of a volume released last year by the Joseph Smith Papers Project: *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Documents*.¹ The volume reproduces the Book of Abraham manuscripts as well as the entire

1. See Jeffrey Dean Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019), 13–104, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-precious-resource-with-some-gaps/>; and John Gee, “The Joseph Smith Papers Project Stumbles,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019), 175–86, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-joseph-smith-papers-project-stumbles/>.

collection of extant documents associated with efforts by Joseph Smith and his associates to study the Egyptian language and translate ancient papyri. The volume provides, for the first time, high-resolution photographic facsimiles of all the relevant documents, along with a side-by-side transcription. We are proud to have published this volume.

The various volumes of *The Joseph Smith Papers* have received dozens of reviews over the years. The reviews have been very positive overall but not without critique. Following the tradition of academic scholarship, we have not responded to negative reviews. The reviews in the *Interpreter* by Jeff Lindsay and John Gee, however, appear to have misunderstood the goals and practices of the Joseph Smith Papers Project to such a degree that they have spread unfortunate misconceptions in various online discussions. Those misconceptions are serious enough that we feel compelled to supply clarification.

The reviews make two serious arguments to which we will respond: that an agenda that could be harmful to the faith of Latter-day Saints permeates this volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers* and that the book is riddled with technical errors. We reject both characterizations.

Does a Personal and Faith-Destroying Agenda Permeate the Book?

The process of writing each volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers* ensures that no one personal viewpoint dominates any book. Each volume is prepared by a large team of professional historians, editors, and source checkers. Our volume on the Book of Abraham was then reviewed by at least six scholars in the Church History Department; the Joseph Smith Papers National Advisory Board, which includes seven experts in documentary editing, Latter-day Saint history, and religious studies, and at least eight external scholars, including Egyptologists and historians of the nineteenth century, both Latter-day Saints and not. In addition, the book was reviewed by a panel of General Authorities and approved for publication by Church leaders.

As is our practice with every volume, the team working on *Volume 4* consulted the work of numerous scholars of various faiths and areas of expertise. Some of these scholars answered questions throughout the volume's development, and some provided crucial feedback during a month-long review period. As we write in our acknowledgments, "Their expertise and insights improved the quality of our work."² While

2. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*

our task was primarily to present and analyze the documents in the volume in their nineteenth-century historical context, our work was made better by four Egyptologists — including John Gee — who helped us understand the ancient context of the papyri and other matters. We respect the expertise of our Egyptologist colleagues and acknowledge their significant contributions to scholarship on the Book of Abraham. We are only the latest in a long line of scholars to work on the Book of Abraham, and we are grateful for and have learned from the work of those who have gone before us. No single discipline — and certainly no single scholar — holds all the answers to the complex questions raised by the Book of Abraham.

Our engagement with the work of Egyptologists did not start with their review of our manuscript. Throughout our work, we closely consulted published works by Egyptologists. Indeed, *Volume 4* cites nine of John Gee’s own works — more than any other author. When we received proposed revisions from Gee and other Egyptologists during their review, we carefully considered each comment and gratefully incorporated many of them. On some topics, we do read the historical evidence in Joseph Smith’s journal and elsewhere as well as the textual evidence in the manuscripts differently than Gee does. For instance, we believe the evidence suggests that Joseph Smith translated portions of the Book of Abraham in Kirtland and then later in Nauvoo, while Gee asserts that all of the translation occurred in Kirtland. However, contrary to the assertions of both Lindsay and Gee that a particular perspective was “assumed” and those of others were “ignored,” we carefully weighed many perspectives before making such decisions — and we qualify our explanations in terms of their probability. It has been a rich and rewarding process to see the training and expertise of multiple fields come together to produce this complex and valuable resource.

The reviews by Lindsay and Gee suggest that the volume takes a particular view on the theological question of precisely how and when Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham. Over time, Latter-day Saints have proposed two basic ways of thinking about the relationship between the Book of Abraham text and the various documents produced in Kirtland to understand the Egyptian language. The first approach suggests that Joseph translated the Book of Abraham first and then used that text to “reverse engineer” an understanding of the Egyptian characters on the papyri. The second approach suggests that Joseph and his associates first studied the ancient papyri, producing documents

as they puzzled over the meaning of the characters on the papyri. The second approach suggests that, as a result of this study, Joseph received the text of the Book of Abraham by revelation. The dating of the associated documents and their relationship to the Book of Abraham text thus become evidence for one position or another. Each of these approaches can be held by faithful Latter-day Saints. The question of how and when Joseph translated the Book of Abraham is a complex one — but it is not the question that this volume strives to answer.

Rather, we have attempted through detailed textual analysis to date the documents associated with the effort by Joseph Smith and his associates to understand the Egyptian papyri. But we also try to be clear as to the limits of our knowledge, repeatedly using words like “likely” or “perhaps” or “probably.” While we have placed the documents in what we judge to be the most sensible order, we are also clear that the order of the documents in the volume does not necessarily represent the relationship among the documents. The ambiguities in the historical record preclude such certainty. The dating of the documents and the order in which they appear do not close doors to any of the most prominent interpretations of the question of how and when Joseph Smith’s translation occurred. Nor does the volume preclude any theory regarding the relationship of the Book of Abraham text to the ancient papyri. We hold that either of the two prevailing theories of the Book of Abraham’s origins — either that the text of the Book of Abraham was on portions of the papyri that are now lost or that the papyri served as a catalyst for a revelation by Joseph Smith — is a faithful approach to understanding the book.

Lindsay laments that the volume does not provide adequate “first aid” for members struggling to understand the nature of the Book of Abraham translation. In so doing, he misunderstands the scope and purpose of the Joseph Smith Papers, which is to provide reputable and accurate transcriptions of Joseph Smith’s papers with contextual annotation for both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint scholars. That is not to say the scholars in the Church History Department do not have an interest in providing information to increase the understanding and support the faith of Church members. Indeed, some of the same historians who contributed to this volume also helped prepare other materials, including the Gospel Topics essay on the translation and historicity of the Book of Abraham. We take very seriously the need to build faith in the restored gospel.

In a related argument, Lindsay implies in his review that there is a “ban” on citing the work of Hugh Nibley in our volume and states

that the book ought to “recognize Hugh Nibley’s extensive work on many aspects of the Book of Abraham as a vital foundation that must be acknowledged.”³ This perspective asks the Joseph Smith Papers to engage in historiography, or reciting and evaluating the history of scholarship on a given topic. Because such discussions typically become outdated much sooner than a documentary edition’s featured transcripts go out of use, it is the long-established policy of the Joseph Smith Papers Project to refrain from historiographical discussions. We respect Nibley’s valuable work on the Book of Abraham and have cited his work in other Church publications, but in this volume we followed our practice of not including historiographic or bibliographic footnotes.

Let us be clear: this volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers* does not advocate an approach to the Book of Abraham that is antithetical to the faith of Latter-day Saints.

Is the Volume Riddled with Technical Mistakes?

While we value the contributions of many scholars of different backgrounds, the Joseph Smith Papers Project has a specific approach and a particular expertise to bring to bear on these documents. We operate within the conventions of both nineteenth-century history and documentary editing. In documentary editing projects, scholars collect, transcribe, annotate, and publish documents for other scholars to use in their own work. Our primary goal is and has been to make available these documents for any and all to read and analyze. We disagree with the implication in both Gee’s and Lindsay’s reviews that Egyptologists offer the most valuable or the *only* path to understanding the documents in *Volume 4*. Most of the documents were, after all, created in the nineteenth century, and even the ancient papyri were studied, preserved, and copied by nineteenth-century clerks.

Each volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers* includes a lengthy statement of editorial method, which is based on a systematic study of the American tradition of historical documentary editing. We were thus surprised that the *Interpreter* published two reviews that misunderstood the practices and aims of the Joseph Smith Papers. Many of their criticisms are a result of misaligned expectations. For example, Gee writes that we “provided no concordance of other major labels for the documents, as is standard in scholarly editions.”⁴ This may be standard in Egyptological editions, but it is not standard in the American tradition of historical documentary editing.

3. Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” 22.

4. Gee, “The Joseph Smith Papers Project Stumbles,” 176.

In his review, Gee complains of “numerous questionable editorial decisions.”⁵ The Joseph Smith Papers Project has robust conventions for presenting documents. Our experience with the entire corpus of Smith’s papers and our access to the actual documents has given our team deep expertise in document provenance, early church record keeping, scribal practices, handwriting identification, and transcription. While Gee alleges that there are numerous errors in the transcripts, the “errors” or “problems” he cites follow the Joseph Smith Papers style guide in every instance. Our thorough approach to transcription is laid out in our statement of editorial method:

To ensure accuracy in representing the texts, transcripts were verified three times, each time by a different set of eyes. The first two verifications were done using high-resolution scanned images. The first was a visual collation of these images with the transcripts, while the second was an independent and double-blind image-to-transcript tandem proofreading. The third and final verification of the transcripts was a visual collation with the original document. At this stage, the verifier employed magnification, ultraviolet light, and multispectral imaging as needed to read badly faded text, recover heavily stricken material, untangle characters written over each other, and recover words canceled by messy “wipe erasures” made when the ink was still wet or removed by knife scraping after the ink had dried.⁶

The editorial method further states:

Text transcription and verification is ... an imperfect art more than a science. Judgments about capitalization, for example, are informed not only by looking at the specific case at hand but by understanding the usual characteristics of each particular writer.... Even the best transcribers and verifiers will differ from one another in making such judgments.⁷

Some of the transcription “errors” alleged by Gee are precisely these kinds of judgment calls. Gee implies that our frequent use of the hollow diamond character to symbolize an illegible character in the transcript is somehow a failure or the result of a lack of skill, stating that “the challenge of transcription defeated the editors.” On the contrary, if a character is ambiguous, the most

5. Ibid.

6. Jensen and Hauglid, *Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, xxxi–xxxii.

7. Ibid., xxxi.

responsible course is to make the reader aware of the uncertainty — to project more certitude than is warranted would be a failure indeed.

Two examples may illustrate why access to originals and understanding of our style guide are crucial to evaluating the accuracy of our transcripts. Gee states that our transcription of “{ϕ\B}ethcho” on page 58 is in error. In our editorial method, the diamond represents an illegible character and the braces (or curly brackets) represent a superimposition (or “writeover”). In this passage, the scribe wrote an illegible character and then inscribed “B” over the previous character. Gee states that “there is no overwriting on the character although there is some touch-up.” A careful examination of the original manuscript under magnification reveals that he is mistaken. A mark or character was written and then overwritten by a capital “B,” as our transcription indicates. In another instance, Gee writes that “descendant” on page 261 should be transcribed “{d\<d>}escendant”. Our editorial style, however, dictates that we not include writeovers when a letter is written over by a second instance of that same letter. While a few of Gee’s twenty-three alternative transcriptions may be correct under a different system of transcription, none represents an actual error in our volume, and many are likely the result of his working with images of the documents rather than the documents themselves.

Conclusion

Scholarship at its best is a conversation. We value dialogue with scholars of all fields, regardless of whether or not they agree with our conclusions, and we seek to be good citizens in the scholarly community by collaborating rather than competing, by continuing in good faith to learn from ongoing scholarship, and by taking seriously criticisms offered by our colleagues. We know that no book is perfect, and ours is no exception. Every volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers* has an online errata page at josephsmithpapers.org, where we list errors we find or are brought to our attention. As the reviewers point out, this volume did mistakenly include an upside-down image of a document. Such are the perils of publishing! When we were informed of the error before the book’s release, we corrected it online and pointed it out in an online errata sheet. We are not shy to correct our errors.

Scholarly communities thrive when their members engage in vigorous debates of ideas rather than attacks on the character of colleagues. We reject the notion that calling into question the faith of fellow Latter-day Saints has any place in public discourse — scholarly or otherwise.

As the Church's Gospel Topics essay recognizes, there is ample room for a variety of faithful Latter-day Saint perspectives on the complex history of the Book of Abraham. We further believe that *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4* can affirm faith in the extraordinary Book of Abraham. We believe in Joseph Smith's prophetic calling and in the profound spiritual truths of the Book of Abraham. We believe that Joseph Smith's record can stand up to scrutiny. That is why we are committed to publishing his documentary record in as transparent and professional a manner as we are able.

Matthew J. Grow is managing director of the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint and a general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers. He served as director of publications at the Church History Department from 2010 to 2019. He has coedited two recent volumes from the Church Historian's Press: *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society and The Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*. He has also authored or coauthored books with Oxford University Press and Yale University Press, including award-winning biographies of Parley P. Pratt and Thomas L. Kane. He was previously an assistant professor of history at the University of Southern Indiana. Grow received his PhD in American history from the University of Notre Dame.

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