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## Egyptian Papyri Rediscovered

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*Manuscript from which the Prophet Joseph Smith obtained Facsimile 1, part of the Book of Abraham, is included in this valuable find.*

## Egyptian Papyri Rediscovered

*By Jay M. Todd  
Editorial Associate*

● Perhaps no discovery in recent memory is expected to arouse as much widespread interest in the restored gospel as is the recent discovery of some Egyptian papyri, one of which is known to have been used by the Prophet Joseph Smith in producing the Book of Abraham.

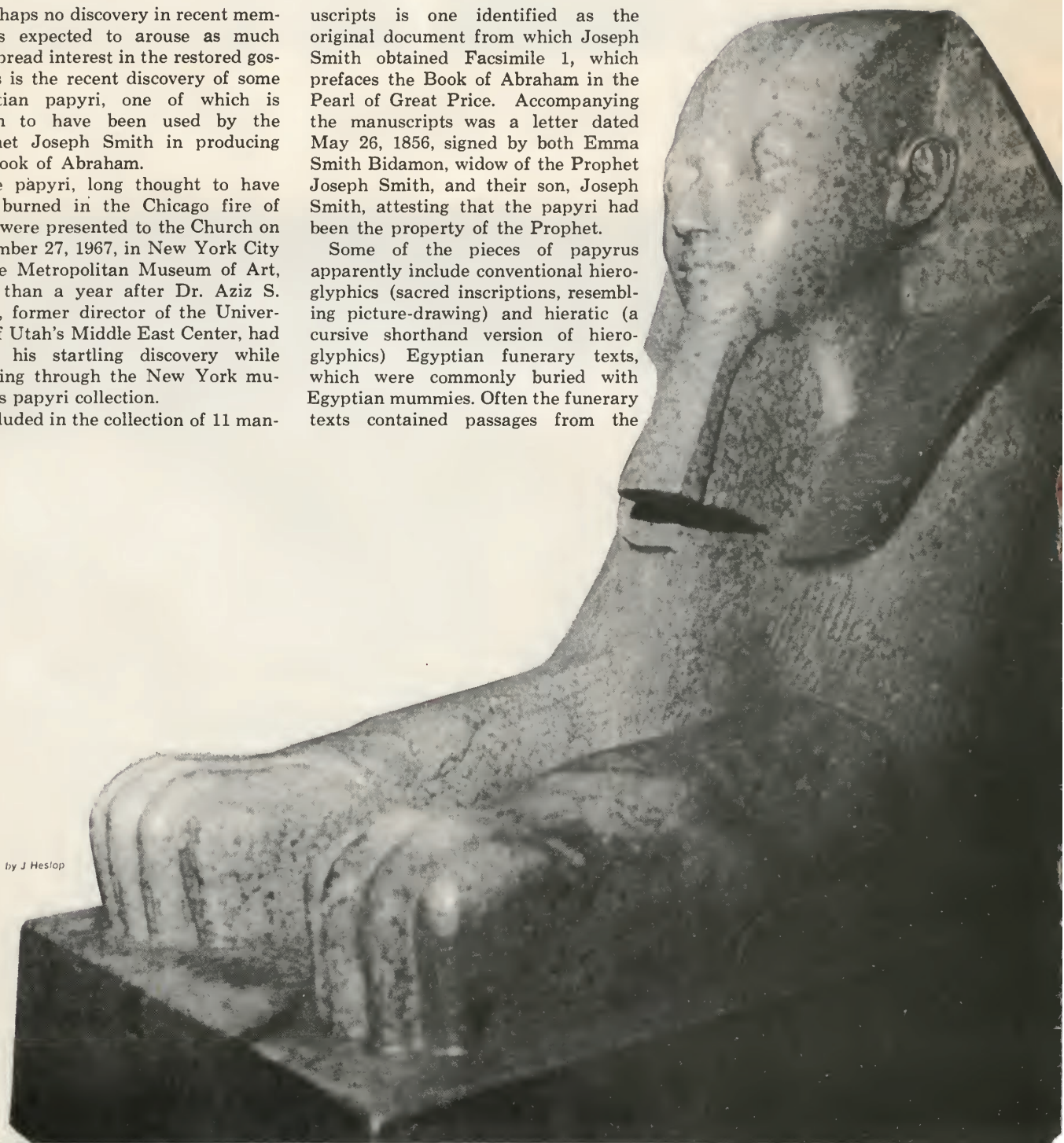
The papyri, long thought to have been burned in the Chicago fire of 1871, were presented to the Church on November 27, 1967, in New York City by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, more than a year after Dr. Aziz S. Atiya, former director of the University of Utah's Middle East Center, had made his startling discovery while browsing through the New York museum's papyri collection.

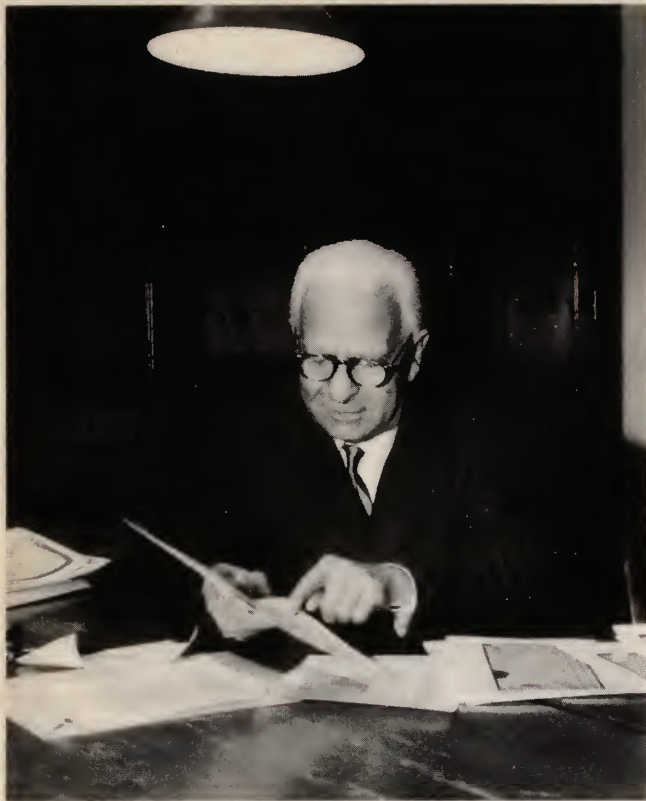
Included in the collection of 11 man-

uscripts is one identified as the original document from which Joseph Smith obtained Facsimile 1, which prefaces the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price. Accompanying the manuscripts was a letter dated May 26, 1856, signed by both Emma Smith Bidamon, widow of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and their son, Joseph Smith, attesting that the papyri had been the property of the Prophet.

Some of the pieces of papyrus apparently include conventional hieroglyphics (sacred inscriptions, resembling picture-drawing) and hieratic (a cursive shorthand version of hieroglyphics) Egyptian funerary texts, which were commonly buried with Egyptian mummies. Often the funerary texts contained passages from the

Photos by J Heslop





Dr. Aziz Atiya examines manuscripts in the room in which he found the papyri and document signed by Emma Smith.



Dr. Aziz Atiya, Dr. Joseph Noble, Dr. Thomas P. F. Hoving, President Tanner compare Facsimile No. 1 with original.

“Book of the Dead,” a book that was to assist in the safe passage of the dead person into the spirit world. It is not known at this time whether the ten other pieces of papyri have a direct connection with the Book of Abraham.

It was also discovered that on the backing of three of the manuscripts (the backing was pasted to the fragile manuscripts, apparently by the Prophet Joseph, to give them firm support) are some jottings, hand-drawn maps, and apparent notations of townships, all thought to be in the Prophet Joseph Smith’s handwriting. Their importance or relevance has not yet been ascertained but will be of intense interest to Latter-day Saint historians.

The collection of manuscripts was presented to President N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency by Thomas P. G. Hoving, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in an impressive ceremony held in the New York museum and attended by worldwide news agencies. After being displayed in the Church offices in Salt Lake

City, the manuscripts were turned over to Dr. Hugh Nibley, scholar, linguist at Brigham Young University, and contributing editor of *The Improvement Era*, for further research and study.

The story of the unusual manner in which the Prophet Joseph Smith obtained the original papyri and four Egyptian mummies has been told often and is full of adventure and fascination. But of equal interest is the story of Dr. Aziz S. Atiya’s discovery of the papyri in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is best told in his own words:

“I was writing a book at the time, one that I had started while a professor of world Christianity and eastern Christianity, and I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art looking for documents, papyri, pictures, and illustrations to serve the book. It must have been in the early spring of 1966. I really forget the date. My book was ready for the press, and I was looking for supplementary material.

“While I was in one of the dim rooms where everything was brought to me, something caught my eye, and I asked one of the assistants to take me behind the bars into the storehouse of documents so that I could look some more. While there I found a file with these documents. I at once recognized the picture part of it. When I saw this picture, I knew that it had appeared in the Pearl of Great Price. I knew the general format of the picture. This kind of picture one can find generally on other papyri, but this particular one has special peculiarities. For instance, the head had fallen off, and I could see that the papyrus was stuck on paper, nineteenth century paper. The head was completed in pencil, apparently by Joseph Smith, who must have had it when that part fell off. He apparently drew the head in his own hand on the supplementary paper. Also, the hands of the mummy, raised as they are, and the leg, raised as it is—usually the mummies lie straight forward—are



very peculiar. This papyrus is Egyptian, true enough, but what it stands for, I really don't know.

"Now when I saw this, I began to search further. I saw more pieces of papyri stacked together and suspected that Providence had assisted. Another document was found with these documents, signed by Joseph Smith's wife, his son, and someone else, testifying that these papyri were treasured and owned by Joseph Smith.

"In 1918 a Mrs. Heusser came to the museum and informed the officials that she had some papyrus, but an understanding was not reached until 1947. They were then acquired by the museum, and then the museum changed curators of Egyptian antiquities and the whole subject was forgotten.

"When I saw these documents, I really was taken back. I know the Mormon community, what it stands for, its scripture, etc., and I said at once that these documents don't belong here. They belong to the Mormon Church. Well, of course, the people in the museum are good friends of mine, and I tried to tempt them into ceding the documents to the Church. I informed my good friend Taza Peirce, who is executive secretary of the Salt Lake Council for International Visitors, and we discussed the manner in which I should acquaint the Mormon community of the find. She suggested I see President Tanner, and she was the intermediary who arranged and attended our first two meetings. Thereafter, I met directly with President Tanner, who had said the Church was very, very interested and would do anything or pay any price for them. Since that time, we worked quietly on the possibility of their transference to the Church.

"In these kinds of things, I never push. I take my time. With some kindly persuasions and discussions, the museum ultimately put a memorandum on the subject to the board of trustees of the museum. This took a long time to come to that step. The Board discussed the matter at very great length, greater length than you might think, and in the end they thought that since the museum had papyri of this nature in plenty, why should they keep these documents from the Church?

"When their generous decision was made, it was telephoned to me by the curator, and he wrote to me also. Then we had a lull in the situation, because

the curator had to go to Egypt for a month in order to arrange final steps for the transference to the Metropolitan Museum of another treasure, in which I also had a hand. It concerns a great temple that is being presented by the Egyptian government to the American nation in recognition of the contributions America has made toward the salvage of the Abyssinian monuments.

"When the curator came back, he reported very nicely about the subject and said, 'The decision has been taken; your Mormon friends are going to get these papyri. So, you go to your friends and the President of the Church and make the necessary arrangements for a ceremony.'

"Of course, President Tanner was just as excited as I was. He reported to President McKay, who was very enthusiastic about the project also. We then decided the way in which the ceremony would be conducted.

"I felt very honored and very, very pleased to be in the center of the picture with such a distinguished person as President Tanner and Mr. Thomas P. G. Hoving, who is director of the museum. He's a very important man, as is his assistant and vice director, Dr. Joseph Noble. He's a very fine man. All of them were there, and to my surprise I found that the papyri were prepared in a very fine box for safekeeping.

"But during the morning of that day I made it a point to go in at an early hour, long before the meeting of these magnates, in order to make sure that the papyri were there—not only the papyri, because what is of importance is the document that accompanied the papyri. It was a faded thing, in nineteenth century hand. I found that the museum had photographed it. Well, of course, they had tried to photograph it before, but it wouldn't show because it was very faded blue paper. Now they used infra-red and ultra-violet photography to get the text out, so that now the photograph is very much better than the original.

"I was enchanted about the discovery of the papyri, which had been in the hands of Joseph Smith, but the discoveries were not ended there. On the morning of handing over the papyri, I began looking them up and down, up and down, and lo! I found on the back of the paper on which the papyri were glued writings and maps and an enumeration of townships and material of the highest value to Mor-

mon history, made, I think, by Joseph Smith's own hand. Three of the backs were full of notes and maps, which have to be studied by the specialists. I am not a specialist of that, but I have an eye for original documents, and these papyri documents are not fakes; they are original Egyptian papyri of a pre-Christian era. They could be from 3000 B.C. to 300 B.C.—over 300 B.C., at any rate. That is my estimate. The era will have to be decided by the specialists.

"I know the kind of ink the Egyptians used and the difference between the genuine and the fake. Papyrus writings were usually placed with the mummy—papyri of many kinds—but essentially the "Book of the Dead," which would give the mummy safe passage to the world beyond. The papyri were sometimes colored. You find papyri like this with blue, gold, and red colors. This was not out of the ordinary. With regard to the ink used, it was generally made of soot and glue, and that is why it was eternal. I think these scrolls are written in that kind of ink. Usually the priests did the writing—they were most skilled. They used reed pens, and had to sharpen the reed and split it in the middle.

"The Egyptians had the papyrus plant, and they used to split it into thin layers and put the layers criss-cross on one another, pound them with a wooden hammer, and then glue them together. They cut them to suit the purposes of the documents they wanted to write. Usually long strips were used to make scrolls, and this one was made in that fashion.

"In order to protect the papyrus, which becomes brittle with age—for instance, the head of the person fell off simply because the papyrus was brittle—Joseph Smith probably thought that the best thing for its protection was to glue it on paper. When I first discovered these documents, I was so excited about the Egyptian writings that I did not look on the back of the paper, but when I returned to the museum, I noticed the writings on the back by Joseph Smith. These writings may not turn out to be of very great importance; however, any footnote one can get in the restoration of Mormon history is valuable.

"The exciting part, which has proved beyond doubt that this was the papyri that was in Joseph Smith's hand, was established by that document signed

by his widow. When I saw that, I had it transcribed and a copy type-written to show to President Tanner.

"Do you know that this discovery appeared in the Egyptian press on the day following the ceremony? On the first page of the most important paper! You would be surprised at the attention that was given to this discovery, and apparently the Egyptians were very pleased about the revealing of these documents. I consider it a great honor to have been able to make this discovery. Great discoveries are always accidental, and this one was as accidental as any discovery I have made—and probably more exciting than all of them. It was an honor to have been able to persuade such an august body as the Metropolitan Museum to present it to another body as august as the Mormon Church. I feel flattered to have been able to do what I did."

The fact that Dr. Atiya made the discovery and so energetically attests to the manuscript's authenticity as that which Joseph Smith used in part in the translation of the Book of Abraham is of no little importance. Dr. Atiya is a world-recognized scholar and researcher of Egyptian and Arabic manuscripts. He was instrumental in building the University of Utah's Middle East Library to what has been called "perhaps the finest in its field in America." (The library, named for Dr. Atiya, was previously regarded as one of the five finest in the U.S.) He is one of three Distinguished Professors at the university. He is well-regarded for his lectures and writings while at the universities of Michigan, Columbia, Princeton, Liverpool, London, Bonn, Zurich, Cairo, and Alexandria. He is the author of approximately 20 volumes and about 50 monograph articles.

But of lasting importance are his writings on the Crusades of the Middle Ages and his studies and writings of his own Orthodox Coptic religion. He is also the founder of the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo. In essence, he is a well-recognized fellow among the worldwide community of scholars.

It could as well be said of Dr. Atiya's discovery as that which Parley P. Pratt said of Joseph's reception of Egyptian mummies and papyrus in the first place: "Singular is the providence by which this ancient record fell into the hands of the servant of the Lord, Joseph Smith."

Indeed, the story of how Joseph

Smith received the papyri is very fascinating, one seemingly filled with providential direction. Some of the details are still clouded, although new research each year seems to divulge additional bits of information, but the principle points of the episode are in general agreement: Napoleon's 1798-99 conquest of Egypt turned the world's attention toward the land of pharaohs, and Egypt was soon overrun with both scientific expeditions and robbers of catacombs and ancient burial sites. One of those early adventurers interested in Egyptian antiquities was a Piedmontese named Antonio Lebolo, who worked as an agent for one of the powerful antiquity barons of the day, Bernardino Drovetti. While in Egypt during what now appears to be at least as early as 1817, Lebolo obtained a license to enter the catacombs in Thebes, Egypt. He discovered a pit tomb near a place called Gurneh, near Thebes, and found many mummies therein. He turned the best of them over to Drovetti but managed to keep some for himself. He later left Egypt en route to France via Trieste with some mummies, 11 of which eventually reached America.

While on the island of Trieste he became ill and died. This is believed to have been in 1823. It has long been presumed that the mummies Joseph Smith eventually received were from Lebolo's find, and that Lebolo willed them to Michael H. Chandler, who has been presumed to have been Lebolo's nephew. But some present-day scholars question Chandler's relationship to Lebolo. As early as 1885 N. L. Nelson, in an address at Brigham Young Academy at Provo, said that Chandler received the mummies from an "English Minister Plenipotentiary." Such a person might have been Henry Salt, a famous representative of the crown in Egypt, who died in 1827. At any event, Chandler apparently was thought to be in Ireland, and the mummies were apparently sent to Ireland via London. Chandler's friends redirected the mummies to America, where Chandler was living in Philadelphia. The mummies eventually arrived at the New York City custom-house.

Scholars have observed that it seems nothing short of miraculous that the mummies and their important records should have safely navigated through the rough waters of antiquity barons, catacomb plunderers, dishonest and rival agents in search of mummies, to

eventually find safe port in the New York harbor.

In April 1833 Michael H. Chandler paid the customs duties, took possession of the 11 mummies, and opened them. He was disappointed in not finding jewels or something of great monetary value, but he did find several rolls of papyrus. Providence seemingly once more entered the story, for while yet in the custom-house, Chandler was informed that there was no man in the city who could translate the scrolls, "but was referred, by the same gentleman (a stranger), to Mr. Joseph Smith, Jr., who, continued he, possesses some kind of power or gifts, by which he had previously translated similar characters."

It was more than two years later, on July 3, 1835, that Chandler met the Prophet Joseph. During those years Chandler had exhibited for a nominal charge the mummies and even sold seven of them to private museums.

According to James R. Clark, a persistent and intelligent student of the history of our Pearl of Great Price, apparently a Benjamin Bullock of Moirie, New York, a nonmember but a relative of Heber C. Kimball, had heard of Joseph Smith, and when Bullock met Chandler, he offered to take him more than 250 miles by wagon to Kirtland, Ohio, to meet the Prophet.

(An interesting sidelight is that as a result of Bullock's visit to Kirtland, he returned to his home greatly impressed with Joseph Smith. He took with him a copy of the Book of Mormon. After he and his wife read it, they moved west to be with the Church.)

When they reached Kirtland, Mr. Chandler asked the Prophet Joseph if he had the power to translate the scrolls, and Joseph replied that he had. The Prophet records that he gave Chandler an interpretation of some of the material on the scrolls.

Mr. Chandler was so impressed that he wrote a certificate testifying of Joseph Smith's "deciphering the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic characters" "to correspond in the most minute matters" with that which Chandler had learned from "the most learned."

The Prophet records in his *Documentary History of the Church* (Vol. 2, page 236): "Soon after this, some of the Saints at Kirtland purchased



the mummies and papyrus, a description of which will appear hereafter, and with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, etc.—a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them.”

Concerning the four mummies, the Prophet generally admitted that he did not know who the mummies were, although some secondary sources later reported that the Prophet identified them as a pharaoh, a queen, a princess, and a slave. The rolls of papyrus are known to have been with one of the female mummies. Concerning the rolls, it has been surmised that apparently they were original records or copies of original records made by Abraham and his grandson Joseph, and written upon by succeeding record keepers and pharaohs over several thousand years' duration.

The result is well-known to Latter-day Saints. The Prophet interpreted some of the writings on the scrolls, and this interpretation and facsimiles 1, 2, and 3 make up our present Book of Abraham. Some present-day scholars think that part of the papyri that Joseph had in his possession contained an actual primer in the Egyptian alphabet and grammar previously prepared by its ancient authors for the benefit of future translators. It is also known that the Prophet promised “further extracts from the Book of Abraham” than those writings that we already have, but martyrdom cut short his publication of new materials. (John Taylor, *Times and Seasons*, Feb. 1843.)

At any rate, after the martyrdom of the Prophet, the mummies and manuscripts were turned over to Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith. At her death in May 1855, the mummies and manuscripts were kept by Emma Smith Bidamon, with whom Lucy Mack Smith lived the two years previous to her death. Emma Smith Bidamon was the Prophet's widow and had since married L. C. Bidamon. Shortly after one year of holding the mummies and manuscripts, Emma sold them to a Mr. A. Coombs.

It was this letter of sales to Mr. A. Coombs, signed by Emma Smith Bidamon and dated May 26, 1856, in addition to the 11 pieces of papyri, that was found by Dr. Atiya. The letter

reads: “This certifies that we have sold to Mr. A. Coombs four Egyptian Mummies with the records of them. This mummies were obtained from the catacombs of Egypt sixty feet below the surface of the Earth. by the antiquarian society of Paris & forwarded to New York & purchased by the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith at the price of twenty four hundred dollars in the year eighteen hundred thirty five they were highly prized by Mr. Smith on account of the importance which attached to the record which were accidentally found enclosed in the breast of one of the Mummies. From translations by Mr. Smith of the Records. these Mummies were found to be the family of Pharo King of Egypt. they were kept exclusively by Mr. Smith until his death & since by the Mother of Mr. Smith notwithstanding we have had repeated offers to purchase which have invariably been refused until her death which occurred on the fourteenth day of May last.” Signed: “L. C. Bidamon, Emma Bidamon, Joseph Smith [her son]. Nauvoo, Hancock Co. Ill, May 26.”

The next account of the mummies appears in the 1859 “St. Louis Museum Catalogue” and then in the 1863 “Chicago Museum Catalogue,” page 42, in which are described two mummies that were “kept by the Prophet's mother until his death, when the heirs sold them, and were shortly after purchased for the Museum.”

A great fire destroyed much of Chicago in 1871, and it had been presumed

that the mummies and manuscripts were burned in that fire, even though the 1856, 1859, and 1863 catalogues do not give any information about the two other mummies or the manuscripts. Information on the two other mummies and the rest of the papyri manuscripts used by the Prophet may yet come forth in some future day.

The collection recently found by Dr. Atiya first came to the attention of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1918. Apparently Mr. A. Coombs had not disposed of all his purchases made from Emma Smith Bidamon, because in 1918 a Mrs. Alice C. Heusser of Brooklyn, New York, took the recently discovered papyri and document signed by Emma Smith to the Metropolitan Museum for evaluation. Mrs. Heusser was a daughter of the housekeeper of Mr. A. Coombs. But the museum did not buy the collection of papyri until Edward Heusser, husband of Alice, finally sold them to the museum in 1947. The papyri have been in the museum's files since that time.

Thus, the stage was set for the remarkable discovery of Dr. Atiya. These pieces of papyrus, only part of the ones Joseph Smith had in his possession, are now back in the hands of the Church. They are a remarkably powerful and tangible testimony to the truthfulness of the Prophet's clear and simply told story that he had in his hands some original papyri documents, some of which he used in producing the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price. ○

The official presentation ceremonies in New York in which President Tanner accepted papyri from Dr. Thomas P. F. Hoving.

