

## **The Audacity of Deceit: Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon**

In 1830 Joseph Smith publishes the Book of Mormon “by the gift and power of God,” translating it into English from Reformed Egyptian writing on ancient golden plates delivered to him by the Angel Moroni.

Since the plates were returned to the angel after the translation, there is no way to authenticate their reality. The Book of Mormon establishes Joseph Smith as a “prophet, seer, and revelator.”

In 1835 a travelling antiquities dealer named Michael Chandler, hearing of Smith’s prowess as a translator of ancient Egyptian, visits the fledgling Mormon community in Kirtland, Ohio.

Chandler’s exhibit consists of four mummies and several papyrus scrolls from an archaeological excavation near Thebes in Egypt.

Smith examines the scrolls and announces that they contain yet another new scripture, original writings of Abraham and Joseph, over 4000 years old. The Mormons buy the mummies and scrolls for \$2400.

Joseph Smith commences the translation of the scrolls in the summer of 1835, compiling an Egyptian dictionary and grammar in the process, the first work of its kind in ancient Egyptian.

Joseph Smith’s translation of *The Book of Abraham* is eventually canonized as scripture in the *Pearl of Great Price*.

<http://scriptures.lds.org/pgp/contents>

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The “Introductory Note” on the official LDS website describes *The Book of Abraham* as “a translation from some Egyptian papyri that came into the hands of Joseph Smith in 1835, containing writings of the patriarch Abraham.”

<http://scriptures.lds.org/en/pgp/introduction>

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Several years later the Mormon community moved to the banks of the Mississippi River in Illinois and established a city called Nauvoo. There in

1842 *The Book of Abraham* was published in a Mormon periodical called *The Times and Seasons*.

The Book of Abraham contains many core Mormon doctrines. As described by Mormon theologian and apostle Bruce McConkie, it “. . . contains priceless information about the gospel, pre-existence, the nature of Deity, the creation, and priesthood -- information which is not otherwise available in any other revelation now extant.”

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In 1844 Joseph Smith was assassinated. Under Brigham Young the Church migrated to Utah, taking the translation of the *Book of Abraham* with them, but leaving the scrolls in the possession of Joseph's wife Emma. In 1856 she sold them and the four mummies. They ended up in the Chicago Museum, which was destroyed by fire in 1871.

In the meantime the ability to translate ancient Egyptian was developing in Europe after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. A copy of the *Pearl of Great Price* published by English Mormons in 1851 reached one of the pioneers of Egyptology, a Frenchman named Theodule Deveria. Although he did not have copies of the papyri from which Joseph Smith produced the translation, the *Book of Abraham* did contain three facsimile drawings, which Joseph had copied from the papyri. Deveria recognized these as common Egyptian funeral drawings, which depicted Egyptian gods and goddesses. They did not, as Joseph Smith claimed, depict the patriarch Abraham in two of the facsimiles. His analysis was translated into English and came to the attention of Church authorities, who in 1880 responded by officially recognizing the *Pearl of Great Price* (including the *Book of Abraham*) as divine scripture, a position the Church has maintained ever since.

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In 1912 the Episcopal Bishop of Utah, Franklin Spalding, sent the three drawings to Egyptian scholars for assessment. They universally replied that the drawings were funeral inscriptions from the *Book of Breathings*, which commonly appeared on unearthened Egyptian funeral artifacts. The *New York Times Magazine* of December 29, 1912, printed a full expose.

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But, the Mormons argued, what about the text? This was just an analysis of the drawings and their captions.

In the spring of 1966, a Professor of Arabic Studies from the University of Utah discovered the original papyri at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Accompanying the papyri was a letter from Emma Smith attesting that they had been the property of Joseph Smith. The Museum donated them to the Church in November, 1967, which published them in the Church magazine, *Improvement Era*.

Successive characters in one of the papyrus fragments corresponded to those in the margin of Joseph Smith's translation manuscript. These characters had no correlation at all to the supposed translation. For each character in the papyrus, indeed, Smith derived about 100 words of text.

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The papyrus text discovered in 1966 turned out to be the same as the drawings analyzed in 1912: Egyptian funeral documents, which were commonly unearthed in excavations of ancient Egyptian graves.

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If Joseph Smith faked the translation of the Book of Abraham, is he to be believed about his translation of the Book of Mormon? And if he is a colossal con man, what does that say about the Church he founded?

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“All liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” Revelation 21:8.