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Some info about the Book of Abraham

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To: Phillip Larsen <phillip.larsen@myldsmail.net>

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Dear Phillip,

Last week you asked:

"A question about Church History. Do we still have the scrolls that contain the book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price? That peaked my curiosity and I wanted to know, but my search that I could do with the indexes in the back didn't come up with any answer to that."

I searched around lds.org some and found the following from a lesson manual:

Who Is Abraham and When Did He Live?

Adam and Eve and the Fall (approximately 4000 B.C.), Enoch (approximately 3000 B.C.), Noah and the Flood (approximately 2400 B.C.), and the tower of Babel (approximately 2200 B.C.) preceded Abraham's time. Abraham, who was born in about 2000 B.C., was the father of Isaac and the grandfather of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. (See Bible Dictionary, "chronology," 635–36.)

How Did the Church Obtain the Book of Abraham?

On 3 July 1835 a man named Michael Chandler brought four Egyptian mummies and several papyrus scrolls of ancient Egyptian writings to Kirtland, Ohio. The mummies and papyri had been discovered in Egypt several years earlier by Antonio Lebolo. Kirtland was one of many stops in the eastern United States for Chandler's mummy exhibition. Chandler was offering the mummies and rolls of papyrus for sale and, at the urging of the Prophet Joseph Smith, several members of the Church donated money to purchase them. In a statement dated 5 July 1835, Joseph Smith, declaring the importance of these ancient Egyptian writings, recorded: "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. ... Truly we can say, the Lord is beginning to reveal the abundance of peace and truth" (History of the Church, 2:236).

How Did the Prophet Translate the Ancient Writings?

The Prophet Joseph Smith never communicated his method of translating these records. As with all other scriptures, a testimony of the truthfulness of these writings is primarily a matter of faith. The greatest evidence of the truthfulness of the book of Abraham is not found in an analysis of physical evidence nor historical background, but in prayerful consideration of its content and power.

Why Did the Prophet Joseph Smith Say He Translated the Writings of Abraham When the Manuscripts Do Not Date to Abraham's Time?

In 1966 eleven fragments of papyri once possessed by the Prophet Joseph Smith were discovered in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. They were given to the Church and have been analyzed by scholars who date them between about 100 B.C. and A.D. 100. A common objection to the authenticity of the book of Abraham is that the manuscripts are not old enough to have been written by Abraham, who lived almost two thousand years before Christ. Joseph Smith never claimed that the papyri were autographic (written by Abraham himself), nor that they dated from the time of Abraham. It is common to refer to an author's works as "his" writings, whether he penned them himself, dictated them to others, or others copied his writings later.

What Did the Prophet Joseph Smith Do with His Translation?

The book of Abraham was originally published a few excerpts at a time in *Times and Seasons*, a Church publication, beginning in March 1842 at Nauvoo, Illinois (see Introductory Note at the beginning of the *Pearl of Great Price*). The Prophet Joseph Smith indicated that he would publish more of the book of Abraham later, but he was martyred before he was able to do so. Concerning the potential length of the completed translation, Oliver Cowdery once said that "volumes" would be necessary to contain it (see *Messenger and Advocate*, Dec. 1835, 236).

In addition to hieroglyphic writings, the manuscript also contained Egyptian drawings. On 23 February 1842, the Prophet Joseph Smith asked Reuben Hedlock, a professional wood engraver and member of the Church, to prepare woodcuts of three of those drawings so they could be printed. Hedlock finished the engravings in one week, and Joseph Smith published the copies (facsimiles) along with the book of Abraham. Joseph Smith's explanations of the drawings accompany the facsimiles.

What Happened to the Mummies and the Papyri?

After the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the four mummies and the papyri became the property of Joseph's widowed mother, Lucy Mack Smith. At Lucy's death

in 1856, Emma Smith, the Prophet's wife, sold the collection to Mr. A. Combs. Several theories have been offered regarding what happened subsequently to the mummies and the papyri. It appears that at least two of the mummies were burned in the great Chicago fire of 1871 (see B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. [1909–11], 2:380–382).

In the early spring of 1966, Dr. Aziz S. Atiya, a University of Utah professor, discovered several fragments of the book of Abraham papyri while doing research at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. These fragments were presented to the Church by the director of the museum on 27 November 1967. The current whereabouts of the other mummies and the other portions of the papyri are unknown (see H. Donl Peterson, "Some Joseph Smith Papyri Rediscovered (1967)" in *Studies in Scripture*, Volume Two, 183–85).

What Is the Significance of the Book of Abraham?

The book of Abraham is an evidence of the inspired calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It came forth at a time when the study of the ancient Egyptian language and culture was just beginning. The scholars of the 1800s had scarcely begun to explore the field of Egyptology, and yet, with no formal training in ancient languages and no knowledge of ancient Egypt (except his work with the Book of Mormon), Joseph Smith began his translation of the ancient manuscripts. His knowledge and ability came through the power and gift of God, together with his own determination and faith.

The book of Abraham reveals truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ that were previously unknown to Church members of Joseph Smith's day. It also casts a bright light upon difficult passages found in other scriptural texts.

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