

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE FACSIMILES FROM THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM
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In 1835 Michael Chandler brought his traveling Egyptian mummy exhibit to the Mormon town of Kirtland, Ohio. Upon examination, Joseph Smith offered to buy the collection as he had discerned that one of the Egyptian papyrus scrolls contained the writings of Old Testament patriarch Abraham. After purchasing the mummies and scrolls for \$2,400 (\$61,300 in today's value), Smith embarked on his new translation project. If this were truly the writings of Abraham it would be the oldest known biblical text. Even the Dead Sea Scrolls would dim in comparison. Like the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith professed to be translating an ancient record, preserved by God to come forth in these last days. It was no less than the original account of the creation as recorded by Abraham, which would even pre-date his translation of the Moses account in his revision of the Bible. During this time the study of Egyptian hieroglyphs was in its infancy, which no doubt left Joseph Smith feeling free to offer his interpretation of the papyri without challenge. While Frenchman Jean-Francois Champollion had been involved in deciphering the Rosetta Stone in the 1820's, which proved to be the key to translating Egyptian hieroglyphs, his research was little known in the United States during Smith's lifetime. Joseph Smith first developed his [Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar](#)^[66] using various hieroglyphs from the papyri and then composed an English explanation. He then worked on his translation for the next several years, finally publishing it in 1842 in the LDS newspaper, *Times and Seasons*, and it was canonized in 1880. Included in the Book of Abraham were three illustrations taken from the papyri, labeled Facsimile Nos. 1, 2 and 3.



Facsimile No. 1 shows a black standing figure, a man lying on a couch, a bird, and four jars underneath the couch. Smith described this as "Abraham fastened upon an altar," and "The idolatrous priest of Elkenah attempting to offer up Abraham as a sacrifice." The bird was identified as the "angel of the Lord" and the four jars were said to represent four "idolatrous" gods. However, Egyptologists would later identify this as a standard scene from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, showing the god Anubis overseeing the embalming of Osiris. Originally the papyrus would have shown Anubis with a jackal head, but the papyrus had evidently been damaged and the Mormons had to guess at the type of head to place on the black figure. Underneath the couch are four canopic jars used to store the person's organs, with lids representing the sons of Horus, and the bird represents the soul of the person being embalmed.



Facsimile No. 2 is a disc with numerous figures and hieroglyphic inscriptions. In Smith's purported translation of the text, he explained that the central figure represented "Kolob," the first creation nearest to the "residence of God." Other figures related to priesthood, various planets and stars, the measurement of time and "God sitting upon his throne." However, this object is known as a hypocephalus, a magical disc placed under the head of a mummy to aid the person in his journey after death. The figures represent well-known Egyptian deities. The Mormon copy is similar to a number of other such objects in various Egyptian collections around the world. [67] Smith identified [figure 7](#) (upside-down seated figure in lower right area) as "God sitting upon his throne," while Egyptologists identify the figure as Min, the Egyptian god of male sexual potency, and is shown with an erection.



Facsimile No. 3 is a picture of five figures: a woman standing behind a seated man, and then another woman, a man and a black figure. Joseph Smith explained that this was a picture of "Abraham sitting upon Pharaoh's throne," with Pharaoh standing behind him. Abraham is said to be "reasoning upon the principles of Astronomy." However, Egyptologists identify this as the Judgment Scene from the Book of the Dead, showing Isis standing behind the seated figure of Osiris.

Standing in front of the seated figure, according to Smith, is a "Prince of Pharaoh." Smith identified the next figure as "Shulem, one of the king's principal waiters" and the black

figure as "Olimlah, a slave belonging to the prince." However, the three figures in front of Osiris have been identified as Maat (the goddess of truth), the deceased person (for whom the papyrus was made), and the black figure is the half-man, half-jackal deity Anubis.

Smith produced three chapters of text but the work was not completed before his death. As scholars increased their ability to read Egyptian hieroglyphs attention was turned to examining the facsimiles reproduced in the Book of Abraham. In 1912 and 1913 several of the world's top Egyptologists commented on Smith's interpretation of the drawings.

One of the scholars who examined Smith's work was James H. Breasted, Ph.D., Haskell Oriental Museum, University of Chicago, who wrote. "These three facsimiles of Egyptian documents in the "Pearl of Great Price" depict the most common objects in the mortuary religion of Egypt. Joseph Smith's interpretations of them as part of a unique revelation through Abraham, therefore, very clearly demonstrate that he was totally unacquainted with the significance of these documents and absolutely ignorant of the simplest facts of Egyptian writing and civilization." The other Egyptologists rendered similar verdicts of Smith's erroneous interpretations.

One has only to look at any credible source on Egyptian deities to see that the figures in the Book of Abraham facsimiles are standard images from the Book of the Dead. To suggest that Abraham would use pictures of pagan gods to illustrate the true God is in direct opposition to the teachings in the Old Testament. In the Ten Commandments, God explicitly stated that He had delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt and that they were to reject all pagan deities, specifically stating that no one was to make any image or likeness of God (Exodus 20:2-4). Joseph Smith's identification of these pagan deities with the God of Abraham makes no more sense than to claim that a statue of the Buddha actually represents Jesus Christ.