

## The Pearl of Great Price, the Book of Abraham and the RLDS Grand Dilemma

*Joseph Smith produced his blatantly fraudulent Book of Abraham in the middle of 1835, even before Kirtland Temple was dedicated. Most RLDS consider Joseph to be at the peak of his prophetic career in 1835. Big problem.*

The “Pearl of Great Price” is a collection of Joseph Smith’s “odds and ends.” It was first published by the LDS (Utah Mormon) church in 1851. LDS still accept the entire book as scripture, whereas RLDS do not — technically. But RLDS actually *do* accept most of the book — 3 out of 4 parts — either as scripture itself, or as authentic church history. Ironically, it’s the part they reject — the 4<sup>th</sup> part, the Book of Abraham — which creates the biggest dilemma for them. This article will explain why.

The Pearl of Great Price is divided into four sections. Here they are.

1. **Book of Moses.** Chapter 1 is a revelation by Joseph, received June 1830, giving prophetic support for his altered KJV Bible now called the “Inspired Version.” It was not included in any Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) until the RLDS 1864 edition as Section 22. Chapters 2–8 comprise Genesis chapters 1–8:18 of the Inspired Version, the official Bible of the RLDS and their offshoots. And so this entire Book of Moses is actually accepted by RLDS as scripture.

2. **The Writings of Joseph Smith.** The first subsection is Matthew 23:39–24:56 of Joseph’s Inspired Version of the Bible. The second subsection is comprised of excerpts from Joseph’s 1838 “History of the Church.” Both of these subsections, then, *are* accepted by RLDS, though the latter is not technically regarded as scripture *per se*, but is fondly embraced as the legitimate history of Joseph Smith and his early church.

3. **The Articles of Faith.** This document is a statement of faith included in an 1842 response to inquiries by John Wentworth, editor of the “Chicago Democrat” newspaper. RLDS usually refer to this document as their “Epitome of Faith” and often distribute it in a poster or framed picture format. It is that highly esteemed. This doctrinal statement continues to be embraced by both RLDS and Mormon churches alike. And so The Articles of Faith are not only accepted, *but fully embraced* by RLDS as a concise theological statement of their faith, generated by their founding prophet.

Before we get into the 4<sup>th</sup> part, I just want to emphasize that the RLDS actually *do* accept the 3 preceding parts of the Pearl of Great Price — part as their own scripture, part as their own legitimate history or as their own theological statement of faith. Now on to the juiciest part of all.

**4. The Book of Abraham.** So this is the only part which RLDS reject. But it's the one that gets them in the biggest trouble. Let's take a close look and see why.

In the mid-1830s a man named Michael Chandler had a touring exhibition of four Egyptian mummies and several papyri which were found with them. Having heard of Joseph's reputation as a translator, Chandler came to Kirtland, Ohio to see if Joseph could translate these papyri. Joseph quickly identified one to be the writings of Abraham and another to be the writings of Joseph of Egypt. Excited about the prospects of Joseph translating *even more* ancient documents, the church purchased the papyri from Chandler for a sizeable sum.

At this point it is important to note that Egyptian was not translatable by American scholars until 1837 when the famous "Rosetta Stone" research became available to the English speaking world. And so Joseph first attempted to construct an Egyptian alphabet and grammar. But this attempt ultimately failed. So Joseph finally resorted to "inspiration," a method with which he was very familiar by now. Since virtually no one else could decipher Egyptian at that time, he must have felt quite safe doing so. *What did he have to lose?*

Through inspiration Joseph "translated" the papyri and claimed them to be the writings of Abraham. (The writings of Joseph of Egypt were left untranslated.) His translation became known as the "Book of Abraham," which the church began promoting as legitimate scripture. It was first published in the church's official newspaper, "Times and Seasons," beginning March 1, 1842.

However, unlike his Book of Mormon, whose plates were supposedly taken away by an angel when it was complete, Joseph left enough of a trail for us to evaluate his effectiveness in translating the Book of Abraham. Joseph included 3 facsimiles of the Egyptian hieroglyphics he had translated in the book's first publication in the Times and Seasons. The first scholarly review of Joseph's translation was printed in 1861 by Jules Remy, a Frenchman who wrote a book about his visit to Salt Lake City. He took the hieroglyphics to Theodule Deveria at the Louvre, who translated them. That translation was published parallel to Joseph's in Remy's "A Journey to Great Salt Lake City." Deveria's translation, however, was vastly different from Joseph's. He claimed they were merely Egyptian funeral documents, unlike the Biblical content which Joseph had ascribed to them. Now who could have ever guessed that you would find ordinary funeral documents in a mummy? What a shocker!

In 1966 a University of Utah Professor by the name of Aziz Atiya recognized Joseph's papyri in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. After substantiating the documentation of the papyri, the museum sold them to the LDS church. Egyptologists once again examined them, and once again they proved to be — funeral documents.

So why does all this matter? RLDS carefully insulate themselves from Joseph Smith during the “Nauvoo era” of the church (1839-1844) because of his esoteric practices such as baptism for the dead and polygamy that developed during that time. And since it was right in the middle of this period (1842) that the church started actually *publishing* his Book of Abraham, RLDS are able to dismiss it with ease. But what they fail to grasp, however, is that this blatant fraud was produced *right in the middle of 1835*, while Joseph’s loyal followers were busily sacrificing their cherished china to be crushed into mortar for the exterior of their beloved Kirtland Temple! The dedication service for the temple didn’t even happen until *March 1836*. And for many, many RLDS, this dedication service remains the absolute pinnacle of the church’s experience, divinely attended and abounding in spiritual manifestations, confirming that Joseph was indeed God’s true prophet and that his church was “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which [the Lord was] well pleased” (D&C 19:5e).

You’ve probably already formed these questions as you’ve read through this article thus far. And together, I think you’ll agree they form the *RLDS Grand Dilemma*:

If Joseph Smith was quite willing to deceive his followers with the Book of Abraham, what does that say about his willingness — *and ability* — to do the same with his other “scriptures,” *including his Book of Mormon*?

Furthermore, what does this story have to say about his fundamental integrity as a *man*, let alone as a *prophet of God*? 🙄

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For a more thorough and detailed analysis, see Paul Trask’s book, **Part Way to Utah: the Forgotten Mormons** at [www.help4rllds.com](http://www.help4rllds.com).