

The *Pearl of Great Price*

As we mentioned in the Introduction to this section, the Utah Mormon church accepts the *Pearl of Great Price* in its entirety, whereas RLDS do not. We include here a discussion of this book in order to differentiate between the RLDS and Mormon churches and to examine the extent of the difference. When we are through, we will find that the RLDS church actually *does* accept the contents of the *Pearl of Great Price*, with the sole exception of Joseph Smith's infamous *Book of Abraham* which comprises one of its four sections.

The *Pearl of Great Price* is a collection of some of Joseph Smith's "odds and ends." It was first published in England in 1851, with an American edition published in 1878. Its content has varied somewhat over the years, but is currently divided into four major sections, (1) the *Book of Moses*, (2) the *Book of Abraham*, (3) *Writings of Joseph Smith* and (4) the *Articles of Faith*. We will look briefly at each of these sections, concluding with an interesting discussion on the *Book of Abraham*.

The *Book of Moses*

This book is comprised of eight chapters. Chapter 1 details two purported encounters of Moses, one with God and the other with Satan. God gives Moses some heretofore hidden details regarding His creation of the world, while Satan entices Moses to worship him. Moses is further told by the Lord that the record of these encounters would be taken out of the book he was going to write, but that the Lord would "raise up another like unto you, and they shall be had again among the children of men." This last part was to contribute prophetic support for Joseph's production of his *Inspired Version* of the Bible as discussed above.

Joseph Smith received this revelation (Chapter 1) in June 1830, but it was not included in either the 1833 *Book of Commandments* or the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants*. The RLDS church added it to their own *Doctrine and Covenants* in 1864, where it remains today as section 22. The RLDS church also includes this document in the forepart of their *Inspired Version* of the Bible. Chapters 2 through 8 of the *Book of Moses* comprise Genesis chapters 1 through 8:18 of the *Inspired Version*. RLDS, then, regard this entire *Book of Moses* as scripture, through inclusion of it in their own *Doctrine and Covenants* and *Inspired Version* of the Bible.

The *Writings of Joseph Smith*

This section is divided into 2 subsections. The first is a reproduction of Matt. 23:39–24:56 of Joseph's *Inspired Version*. The second contains excerpts from Joseph's 1838 *History of the Church*. The RLDS church, then, accepts both of these subsections. The first is regarded as

scripture by virtue of its inclusion in the *Inspired Version*. The second is not technically regarded as scripture *per se*, but is considered the legitimate history of Joseph Smith and his early church.

The Articles of Faith

This document represents a skeletal statement of faith. In 1842 Joseph Smith was asked to provide an article on the history of his church by John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*. The resultant article has since come to be known simply as *The Wentworth Letter*. In addition to providing yet another version of his earliest experiences and a short history of his church, the article included this statement of faith. It continues to be embraced by both RLDS and Mormon churches. The RLDS church also refers to it as the *Epitome of Faith*. It has been included in Appendix C.

The Book of Abraham

The early 1800s was a time of unauthorized looting of Egyptian tombs. Numerous artifacts were uprooted and sent off for display. In the mid-1830s a gentleman by the name of Michael Chandler was touring the country with an exhibition of four Egyptian mummies along with several papyri which had been found inside them. Having heard of Joseph Smith's reputation as a translator, Chandler came to Kirtland, Ohio to see if Joseph could translate these papyri. Joseph quickly identified one of the papyri to be the writings of Abraham and another the writings of Joseph of Egypt. Greatly excited by the prospects of Joseph being able to translate more newly discovered ancient documents, the church purchased the papyri from Chandler for a sizable sum.

At this time Egyptian was still a lost language to American scholars. Although Champollion had already broken the code of the Egyptian language by use of the famous "Rosetta stone," the results of his research would not be available to the English speaking world until 1837 through John G. Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*. Therefore, like many other amateurs, Joseph initially tried to construct an Egyptian alphabet and grammar to facilitate a translation. This was a logical step for him at this point in time since he had recently become fascinated with the whole field of linguistics, especially the Greek and Hebrew languages. But when this grammatical approach inevitably failed, Joseph resorted to "inspiration," a method with which he had become very familiar. He most likely did this to satisfy the high hopes of the church which was eagerly awaiting yet another new translation from their renowned "Prophet, Seer and Revelator." Since no one else could decipher Egyptian, either, what did he have to lose?

Through this inspiration Joseph "translated" the papyri purported to be the writings of Abraham. The writings of Joseph of Egypt were left untranslated. His translation became known as the *Book of Abraham*, and the church began promoting it as legitimate scripture. It was formally published in the church's official newspaper *Times and Seasons* beginning March 1, 1842. As we mentioned above, it was first included in the *Pearl of Great Price* in 1851.

The *Book of Abraham* is divided into 5 chapters and a total of 136 verses. Its three major sections are:

1. *Chapters 1 and 2.* A discussion and reinterpretation of Abraham's travels and of God's dealing with him. Much new material is introduced. Descendants of Ham are declared under a perpetual curse and thus unworthy to hold priesthood.¹
2. *Chapter 3.* Contains a lecture which God gives to Abraham wherein He describes a metaphysical understanding of time, the structure of the universe and the preexistence of mankind. It also introduces the concept of a plurality of gods who merely *organized existing materials* into our present earth, thus denying that God alone *created* the earth from *nothing at all*.
3. *Chapters 4 and 5.* This section builds off the concept of a plurality of gods and thus reinterprets the creation accounts of Genesis chapters 1 and 2.

However, unlike his Book of Mormon, whose plates were taken away by an angel as soon as it was complete, Joseph left us enough of a trail this time to be able 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*. These same facsimiles were later printed as part of the *Book of Abraham* when it was included in the *Pearl of Great Price*. Joseph, however, would not live long enough to face scholarly reviews of his translation work.

The first scholarly review of Joseph's translation came in 1860. You will recall that Champollion's work with the Rosetta stone unlocked the mystery of the Egyptian language in the 1830s, and the result of his research was made available to America as early as 1837. By 1860 the knowledge of Egyptian had advanced far enough to allow for a review of Joseph's work. During a visit to Salt Lake City, a Frenchman by the name of Jules Remy became interested in the book, and brought their hieroglyphics to the attention of a Coptic student in the Louvre by the name of Theodule Deveria. Deveria correctly translated the Egyptian which Remy later published parallel to Joseph's translation in *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City* (1861). Needless to say, Deveria's translation was vastly different than Joseph Smith's. Unlike the Biblical content which Joseph had ascribed to them, Deveria claimed that they were merely Egyptian funeral documents, common and very plentiful throughout Egypt. This, of course, would make good sense, since the papyri were found in *mummies*. Deveria's work must have been pretty good, because another Egyptologist commented over 100 years later "I made a translation of as much as I could read of the facsimiles in the PGP [Pearl of Great Price]; it is no great improvement on that published by Deveria about 100 years ago."²

In 1912 a number of leading Egyptologists were also asked to review Joseph's translation work. Like Deveria, they also determined that the papyri were nothing more than common Egyptian funeral documents. F.S. Spalding published the results of this review in *Joseph Smith Jr. as a Translator*. Arthur Mace of the Metropolitan Museum of Art referred to Joseph's

1. This statement contributed significantly to the Mormon church's ban on black priesthood members. In 1978 this ban was lifted by virtue of a new "revelation."

2. Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 299.

translation as “a farrago of nonsense from beginning to end.”³ Dr. W.M. Flinders Petrie of London University concluded “It may safely be said that there is not a single word that is true in these explanations.”⁴

But even more concrete evidence would come to light in the 1960s: the actual papyri themselves. For many years it was thought that after Joseph’s death the papyri had been sold by a friend of William Smith to the Wood museum, where they were subsequently destroyed by the great Chicago fire of 1871. But in 1966 University of Utah Professor Aziz S. Atiya seemed to recognize papyri in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art which resembled the facsimiles he had seen in the *Book of Abraham*. Subsequent research verified that it was Emma Smith who had sold the papyri to an A. Combs in 1856, which papyri were ultimately sold to the museum in 1947. Convinced of this documentation, the museum concluded that the rightful home of the papyri was with the LDS church. Consequently, the museum presented these papyri to LDS leaders in November 1967. The cost to the museum was covered by a donation from an anonymous friend. When these papyri fragments were examined by Egyptologists they were once again found to be Egyptian funeral documents. A complete history of the papyri together with their correct translation was published in the intellectual Mormon publication *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 3, no. 2, Summer 1968, and no. 3, Autumn 1968.⁵

Conclusion

So why have we spent so much time looking at the *Pearl of Great Price* since RLDS do not include it *per se* as one of their “three standard books” of scripture? Because in reality they *do* accept quite a bit of this book. As we illustrated above, they accept the entire *Book of Moses* and the first half of the *Writings of Joseph Smith* as scripture, since they are merely excerpts from their own *Inspired Version* of the Bible. While they have not formally canonized the second half of Joseph’s *Writings*, they embrace it as Joseph’s legitimate history just as fervently as do Utah Mormons. And they similarly embrace *The Articles of Faith* as well, referring to it as Joseph’s *Epitome of Faith*.

But the most important implication of the *Pearl of Great Price* for RLDS is the *Book of Abraham*. As we discussed in chapter 1, RLDS have distanced and carefully insulated themselves from Joseph Smith during the “Nauvoo era” of the church, roughly 1839–1844. The *Book of Abraham*, however, was produced in the *middle of 1835*. This is right in the midst of what many RLDS consider to be some of Joseph’s best years as a prophet of God. For example, the Kirtland Temple is revered as one of their most treasured possessions from that era. But the temple’s highly touted dedication service did not even occur until *March 1836*. Thus, while his loyal followers were working and sacrificing to complete their historic first temple, Joseph was busy producing his blatantly fraudulent *Book of Abraham*.

3. F.S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith Jr. as a Translator*, (Salt Lake City: 1912), as cited in Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 175.

4. *Ibid.*

5. The historical background of the *Book of Abraham* and its papyri presented in this section was summarized from Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp. 170–175, 421–423, and Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, pp. 294–298, 302–305, 314–315. The analysis of the contents of the *Book of Abraham* is from my personal review of it as contained in *The Pearl of Great Price*.

If Joseph was perfectly willing to defraud his followers with the *Book of Abraham*, what does that have to say about both his *willingness* and *ability* to do the same with his Book of Mormon and other scriptures? As with so many of his other actions, Joseph's open deception here brings his fundamental integrity into serious question.