

A Joseph Smith Commentary

on

The Book of Abraham

An Introduction to the Study of the  
Book of Abraham

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William V. Smith

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"I never had the feeling for one moment, to believe that any man or set of men or beings upon the face of the whole earth had anything to do with [Joseph Smith], for he was superior to them all, and held the keys of salvation over them." -Brigham Young

"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certainty. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace." - Blaise Pascal  
A paper dated 23 Nov. 1654, stitched in the lining of his coat, discovered after his death.

*To Hugh Winder Nibley*

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## Introduction

Among books of less than twenty pages of text, the Book of Abraham certainly rivals most in the amount that has been written about it. Perhaps this is a measure of its value and its shock value (and no doubt the prosperity of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). It is doubtful that there are many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormons) who haven't at least wondered about some aspect of it. And it does have intrinsic pictures! While that does not make it unusual among Egyptian religious texts, it is perhaps a bit unusual for the casual reader of the standard Christian or Jewish texts (NT, OT).

The attention has not been entirely positive. Criticism has surrounded the Book of Abraham almost from the day it came off the presses in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1842, while the Mormons seemed rather matter-of-fact about the whole thing. Indeed, among many Latter-day Saints (in the author's experience), the book tends to be more a curiosity than anything else. In the last ten years, it has, barring a few verses in chapter 3, received very little attention in sermons at the general conferences of the Church, and a text survey of the fifty years prior to that indicates that this is not particularly unusual. It is after all, only a few pages long. Franklin D. Richards' estimate of its relative place in the utility index of Church literature was correct, it was not directed to the "first encounter" audience.

Critics of various sorts (see Appendix V for a classification), however, have spent much time and money dogging the Mormons for their continued inclusion of the Book of Abraham in their canon. This criticism ranges from mere repackaging of the writings of a previous generation to the attention of a few trained scholars.

Part of the author's interest in the book stems from the attention it received from Joseph Smith, the founder of the LDS Church. From 1835 to 1844, it seems to have occupied him to a greater or lesser degree. It played a major role in his sermons during his Nauvoo life (1839 to 1844). It seems that roughly 20 - 25% of his recorded sermons after 1835 mention a doctrine from the book or some other aspect of it (by my count). It was clearly the basis of some of his most common threads of thought and may have been a major catalyst in moving Mormonism from its primitive stage to the more fully formed one at the end of Joseph's life. For such a tiny piece of literature, this is remarkable. It seems worth anyone's time to get to know the book.

The interest of the author determines the book; this book considers three aspects of the Book of Abraham: two are mainly historical; the other is institutional (doctrinal). The literature on the Book of Abraham ranges from doctrinal commentaries on the *Pearl of Great Price* (the LDS book of scripture containing the Book of Abraham) to some studies directed to the history of Joseph Smith's involvement with the Egyptian artifacts with which the Book of Abraham has been associated. Few of the latter treat the relevant doctrinal or ancient historical issues. Finally, there is a significant literature regarding the explanations of the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham as well as textual parallels with other ancient extra-canonical writings.

There does not seem to exist a study, which focuses primarily on the Book of Abraham and does it from all three aspects just mentioned. This lack is probably not just a silly oversight. The techniques, methods and types of acceptable discourse in each kind of study make a somewhat uncomfortable interface between these three approaches. Moreover, a truly comprehensive work in this direction is at present impossible. But I hope that this work will be a useful step in bringing different perspectives together.<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed, if any new service is performed here, it might be the gathering of various



materials that have not come together in this way before. In any case, enough sources are given that the student interested in a deeper view of some topic should find help in that pursuit.

A work like this one is nothing more than it claims to be, a series of comments on a text. It is not a lengthy essay or even a connected group of essays. Rather it is a tool for the interested student that may suggest avenues for further investigation. Opinions are expressed that will be shown sooner or later to be at best only part of the truth regarding their subjects.

#### *Basic Assumptions.*

It is essential to know the underlying assumptions of the author before embarking on the study of a work like this one.<sup>(2)</sup> I did not begin with the assumption that a naturalistic explanation of the production of the Book of Abraham is the only possible one. Instead of seeking possible ways in which Joseph Smith engaged in fraud or self-delusion, I try to take the book on its own terms - to see if Joseph Smith's work and his ideas about it find any support in reason, the techniques of modern scholarship and whether the book and Joseph Smith's ideas are consistent<sup>(3)</sup>. Viewing this as just an apology for Joseph Smith would be a mistake. There is no attempt here to construct a proof that Joseph Smith was an inspired translator. However this work does contain evidence in favor of this idea and furthermore I find that reason in many respects supports Joseph Smith's work as a translator.<sup>(4)</sup> However, it is not possible presently to argue with complete certainty, with logic alone, that Joseph Smith (on his own terms) gave an accurate translation of an ancient document, or for that matter that he failed to do this,<sup>(5)</sup> in producing the Book of Abraham. Though some may find this a disappointment, to me it seems entirely consistent with Joseph Smith's claims: that he was a prophet, seer, translator and revelator are most importantly matters of faith acquired by each person (or not) for himself, according to Joseph Smith and his writings.<sup>(6)</sup>

Until all the documents used by Joseph Smith to produce the Book of Abraham become available for examination, the text (as distinguished from the "facsimiles"<sup>(7)</sup>) must be examined in the light of other ancient records that bear on the Book of Abraham<sup>(8)</sup>, some of which have only recently become available<sup>(9)</sup>. While a detailed study of such records and their comparison to scripture would claim far more space than is available here, I do attempt to show that unique aspects of the Book of Abraham are confirmed by other ancient documents. For Latter-day Saints at least, where differences exist, it is clear that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepts the Book of Abraham as scripture while other records outside their canon are regarded as secondary. No LDS "doctrine" would properly be based on such non-canonical records without further prophetic pronouncement<sup>(10)</sup>, but the fact that the Book of Abraham is confirmed quite specifically in many of its basic claims by such records stands as a support of Joseph Smith since he had essentially no access to them.

A thing that we hope will come into focus for the reader is that the translation of the Book of Abraham likely affected Joseph Smith's understanding of fundamental doctrines of his faith such as preexistence, priesthood, the nature of Christ and God and the ordinances of LDS temples<sup>(11)</sup>. It was not just a short term adventure. On the contrary, it seems to have been fundamental for Smith. Such a thesis is difficult to establish since the evidence is mostly circumstantial<sup>(12)</sup>, but this evidence is compelling, in the author's judgment. If this is correct, then at the very least it enhances our understanding of Joseph Smith and it may be pivotal in establishing a true picture of early Mormonism.

#### *Difficulties in Writing a Commentary on the Book of Abraham.*

The challenges in writing this book are at least threefold:

1. Doctrinal identification and commentary (here this means statements of Joseph Smith relevant to the book and especially those after 1835).
2. Modern historical commentary (details surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Abraham in our day).
3. Ancient historical commentary (the ancient context of the book).

Few people can say they are completely qualified on all three scores.<sup>(13)</sup> The main hope of providing anything productive to the reader is to appeal to the obvious important sources in each of these fields, respectively:

1. Joseph Smith's remarks about Book of Abraham ideas.<sup>(14)</sup>
2. Historical documents and works concerning Joseph Smith and his production of the Book of Abraham.
3. The pertinent ancient documents and scholarship.

Some difficulties with this approach are immediately observable. First, the documentation of the circumstances surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Abraham is much less thorough than could be hoped with the occasional red herring confounding things. Second, portions of actual ancient documents are reproduced for the reader in the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham with Joseph Smith's own peculiar interpretations. The Book of Abraham is a distinctive work. It claims to be both modern and ancient revelation, history, and to have explicit and *graphic* connections to ancient civilizations. At least some of these civilizations have surviving records from sources entirely unrelated to Joseph Smith. Hence the Book of Abraham is a subject requiring great care. Third is the non-trivial issue of balance. What path should be taken in terms of the three points of view mentioned above? Partly this is answered by circumstance. For example, few doctrinal exegetes or LDS Church authorities have made much of the facsimiles, but they have been the major emphasis for critics and scholars of Joseph Smith and the Book of Abraham in terms of ancient sources. Nevertheless, other questions remain, such as who is given a doctrinal "voice," and who is not. This is not entirely a question of authority, but also one of space. No doubt the choices made here will not satisfy everyone. It is not my place or intent to delineate Mormon doctrine. Moreover, the thesis that Smith's teachings and the Book of Abraham were strongly linked forces me to regard his public teachings (and in some cases writing or private remarks) as a kind of doctrinal standard. This then is our working definition of doctrine. It immediately requires that we be as sure as we can possibly be as to exactly what Joseph said. This is no easy task in itself.

*Sources Used and Methods of Study.*

Nevertheless, let us step into deep waters with the following general rules of action:

- Doctrinal commentary is primarily confined to Joseph Smith himself with some other materials directly bearing on the ideas of the text. The choice of this material is not justified at each turn and is entirely the responsibility of the author. Commentary is sometimes expanded after this to various leaders of the LDS Church, parallels with other ancient literature and the author's own comments when there is some need for balance or to provide the reader some reflection of Joseph Smith's ideas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church.

- Source material concerning the translation and publication of the Book of Abraham is presented as notes to the main text. Several manuscript versions of the text exist <sup>(15)</sup>. However, the commented text is the one that appeared as edited by Joseph Smith himself in the *Times and Seasons* issues of March 1842 (this text is quite close to the present published version, with a few exceptions discussed as they are encountered). This translated text was published nearly seven years after the Egyptian artifacts came into the possession of Joseph Smith in Kirtland, Ohio. They were apparently exhumed in Thebes <sup>(16)</sup>. Oddly, this is roughly the same time lapse between Joseph Smith's introduction to the plates of Mormon (1823) and the publication of the Book of Mormon (1830).
- Historical notes on the translation are divided between the two text installments as they appeared in the *Times and Seasons* issues, vol. 3 no. 9 and vol. 3 no. 10 (Facsimile No. 2 appeared as a broadside insert in April and Facsimile No. 3 appeared later, in vol. 3 no. 14) so that some notes appear preceding chapter 1 and others appear preceding chapter 2 verse 19.
- As far as ancient sources are concerned, commentary is confined to parallels from accessible English translations of various texts <sup>(17)</sup>, discussions from students of ancient aspects of the Book of Abraham and related fields of study and the scholarship in various fields of ancient studies. However, I feel no compulsion to accept all the conclusions of a particular writer. In matters of archaeology and geography, this book refers as often as possible to standard reference works that have reasonably wide distribution.

In working with ancient texts, the reader should always keep the problems of *dating* these sources in mind. When a date is mentioned for a particular ancient source, the reader should remember that such dates are probabilistic in nature. They give an estimate of current scholarship as to when the document was first composed in its presently available form. Such a date does not necessarily imply that the document is not based on an earlier source <sup>(18)</sup>.

LDS readers, believing as they do that the Book of Abraham is the translation of an ancient record, itself dependent on earlier sources <sup>(19)</sup>, will recognize the possibility that other ancient sources quoted in this commentary, while often dated long after the lifetime of Abraham, may be based in part on traditions possibly having a common ancestor with the transmitted texts of the Book of Abraham.

- The technical methods of criticism <sup>(20)</sup> and dating are not useless in the study of the Book of Abraham, but must be considered in balance; the author does not dismiss out of hand Joseph Smith's explanation of the source of the Book of Abraham, i.e., that it contains a copy perhaps

many times removed, of an autograph <sup>(21)</sup>of Abraham in translation <sup>(22)</sup>. This approach, at least for me, turns out to yield interesting insights into the book itself.

After all this, the reader may be asking, "why is this called a *Joseph Smith* commentary?" Part of the answer is again that he had significant and clarifying things to say about matters found in the Book of Abraham, indeed as noted twice already, a large proportion of what he said in the public sermons of his later life seem to be causally linked to the Book of Abraham. But his philosophy about the understanding of scripture comes into play too. He spent much time and energy on what seemed to some of his colleagues if not a silly enterprise at least an esoteric one: learning Hebrew, Greek, German and otherwise going to the written source of ancient scripture. He was as much a thinker <sup>(23)</sup>about scripture as what today might popularly (though inaccurately for him) be termed a "mystic." Only "time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts," could lead to the truth. "By study and also by faith," was not just a written maxim for Joseph Smith. <sup>(24)</sup>

#### *Technical and Organizational Matters.*

References to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, its members, records, etc. are often made using mostly well-recognized abbreviations such as "the Church," "LDS," or "Mormon." At various points, personalities relevant to the subject may be referred to by title (such as President or Prophet) by first name alone (as Joseph, for Joseph Smith) or last name alone (such as Smith, or Woodruff, etc.). The usage conforms to the author's sense of the appropriate, stemming from any number of contextual reasons, hopefully without ambiguity.

When some 19<sup>th</sup> century records are quoted, occasionally some modern spelling and punctuation is indicated to make reading easier. Comments by the author in the main text or within quotations in the notes are normally enclosed by [brackets] as are source references in notes.

Standard LDS literary abbreviations are used throughout (for example, *JD* for *Journal of Discourses*). Others are defined and used as needed (see the sections below on Abbreviations and Manuscript and Text Naming Conventions).

Citations usually conform to the pattern, *author, date, page* such as Wilson, 1987, 24 in referring to the References. Occasionally this is violated when an author supplies only one reference (no date is registered), or when the reference applies generally to the subject and so page number(s) may not be given. Any variation from this is hopefully self-explanatory. When textual notes in the commentary are referenced, we usually write "see note ----" whereas when a footnote or endnote in a cited reference is meant we write "n52" for footnote or endnote 52 in the cited reference, for example.

The first edition of this book was written well over 15 years ago, in 1991. I had noticed the linkage of many of Joseph Smith's ideas to the Book of Abraham years before that. Gradually that developed into the idea of a book on the subject which was distributed privately to various interested parties. With the maturing of the internet, it seemed an easy task to make the book available to a wider audience and so the internet version of the book came about. As my interest continued in the project, it seemed important to carefully examine Joseph Smith's teachings. Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook had done part of what I needed with their seminal work, *The Words of Joseph Smith*. I started then to look for other sources of Joseph Smith's remarks and this matured into the *The Parallel Joseph*, another (as yet unfinished) internet resource (see below). Gradually it

became apparent that a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the commentary was needed to cover the rapidly developing studies of things Abrahamic and this appeared (already out of date) in 2001. Finally, the same processes led to this present edition, which is the first trade published paper version. It is my hope that it will be a useful reference for anyone beginning the journey I started many years ago.

As noted, the text of the Book of Abraham is presented here as it originally appeared in the *Times and Seasons*, an LDS Church newspaper published while the headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was at Nauvoo, Illinois<sup>(25)</sup>. Partly this was done because it seemed appropriate, given the focus of the book, to let the other texts orbit around the first published one, done under the eye of Joseph Smith himself. This was *not* done because the author harbors any kind of dissatisfaction with modern editions of the Book of Abraham. The contrary is true. The modern Pearl of Great Price is much more readable and helpful to Latter-day Saints for many reasons. The text is presented by sections corresponding to the original verse structure, with comments following, given in footnote form. Comments are often cross-referenced to connect information to relevant points in the text. Text notes are numbered consecutively in the commentary. The appendices (and this introduction) have their own note systems as needed. The division into chapters and verses as given by Joseph Smith and presented here differs from the one used in the current (1981) edition (first introduced by James E. Talmage in 1902). Joseph Smith divided the text into 32 numbered paragraphs or verses. The present (1981) verse breaks are shown in parentheses like (1:14)<sup>(26)</sup> to show where a verse in the current edition of the Book of Abraham begins. Citations of sermons or writings of Joseph Smith are given with date and person making the record. While I refer to the original records, with some exceptions the citations may be found in *The Words of Joseph Smith*<sup>(27)</sup>, various early Church publications, the *History of the Church*,<sup>(28)</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*<sup>(29)</sup> and Dean Jessee's books, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*<sup>(30)</sup> and *The Papers of Joseph Smith*<sup>(31)</sup>. There is also the book mentioned above on Joseph Smith's sermons, *The Parallel Joseph*, which tries to catalog his public sayings from 1830 to 1844 and can be found online at [www.boap.org](http://www.boap.org). The latter may eventually be published in paper form.

In the past, some of Joseph Smith's interpretations of ancient writings or traditional doctrinal statements have been criticized as being based on poorly attested or questionable sources. Fortunately, we are in a better position than ever to evaluate these sources<sup>(32)</sup>. When an issue is not clear (to the author at least), I have tried to say that and supply the reader with relevant information. Occasionally, a statement of Joseph Smith is relevant to more than one subtext of the Book of Abraham and such statements may be repeated in the notes for that reason.

There are 11 figures (drawings, photos or digital scans) in the commentary itself, reference to these is abbreviated as “fig. 1” for example. The explanations of the facsimiles have always used this same terminology. However, there is little chance of confusion, since the context will make clear which type of figure is referred to in the commentary.

Several appendices exist which examine various aspects of the text including parallels with other accounts of the same events and textual formatting<sup>(33)</sup> to observe various text structures.

Yet at every step personal judgment comes into play. The Mormon belief in continued revelation makes any modern commentary on LDS scripture temporary not just because historical ideas change or documents are discovered. The limited scope of this commentary helps to control not only eligible sources but size. The reader wishing to cast a wider net for interpretive purposes may certainly do so.

There is no doubt that many important ideas and illustrations have been left out of this book. Meanwhile, the lack of depth in some ways must be attributed to the author, not the subject matter. Still, within the limited goals set here, perhaps many of those things that must be common to any commentary on the Book of Abraham (of the sort we have named) have been at least touched on. Notice of errors and improvements is welcomed.

Finally, Appendix VI and the Manuscript and Text Naming Conventions section have some overlap. Readers interested in the topic of Appendix VI should also consult the above named section.

This work is the complete responsibility of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinions or positions of any other individual or group. But thanks go to various individuals through the years for inspiration, suggestions, encouragement, some of whom patiently endured interrogation of varying degrees. The list includes, in no particular order, Hugh Nibley, for occasional patient explanations, Reed Durham and Max Parkin, for early guidance in historical matters, Jeanine Cook and Lauritz Peterson, for some years of help in negotiating the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Davis Bitton, for encouraging words, Elder Neal A. Maxwell, for taking an interest in the idea, Peter Crawley, for help with Book of Abraham imprints, Glenn Rowe of the Library-Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for helping me to track down some obscurita, Jack Lyon, for suggesting this effort and the preparation for that, FARMS for the careful pursuit of facts surrounding the Joseph Smith Papyri (hereafter P. Joseph Smith or JSP) and related matters, Brian Hauglid for generously offering to share some of his findings regarding the Book of Abraham materials owned by The Church of Jesus Christ (with their kind permission), and my wife and family for putting up with occasional disappearances behind stacks of books and computer screens. Also Russell Taylor and the staff of the L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library at Brigham Young University and the staffs of the Marriot Library at the University of Utah and the Library-Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for their capable and patient assistance over the years. Finally, the faculty at the old Middle East Studies Center at the University of Utah those decades ago who fired my interest in the ANE.

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## Introduction Notes

1. It is difficult to claim originality in a work like this. Research continues to uncover information. Ideas first expressed in earlier editions of this work were sometimes unintended rediscoveries of mine or were rediscovered and improved by others. Internet publications are still not well-mixed with paper imprints. When I have been made aware of oversights or better sources, due credit has been given. I apologize in advance for any lack of acknowledgement.

2. Louis Midgley has observed: “. . . assumptions about how historians both can and must let evidence (or facts) do the talking runs counter to the best recent thought about reading texts, for it is a crude and now rather widely rejected positivism that assumes that there is much of anything evident apart from theories, assumptions, or formal or informal pre-understandings. Those familiar with the discussions of historical method now tend to hold that such theories, assumptions, and pre-understandings are necessarily brought to texts by the exegete or historian, consequently making for them something evident in those texts, and thereby opening a window to the past.” [Louis Midgley, "More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon," in RBBM 3:291.] As Bultmann showed, exegesis without presuppositions is an illusion. Some critics of Joseph Smith

have claimed to approach the Book of Abraham with "objectivity" or a "critical method." In many cases what results is eisegesis from a concealed atheism or derisive attitude toward Joseph Smith. [Bernard C. Lategan, *ABD* 3:150ff , esp. 3:151a.] This sort of thing may happen on both sides of any controversy. For example, Kitchen, 2003, argues effectively against some of the wholesale dumping of classical beliefs that has occurred in Old Testament studies on the thinnest of presuppositions (for example chapter 7, 9 and 10). On the other hand, his criticism of what others view as "Deutero-emanations" in matters like radical monotheism seems strained and avoids the contra reasoning of people like Barker, 1988, 1992 for example. Latter-day Saints tend to feel little anxiety over such issues, since the sum of Joseph Smith's theology provides a more extensive and more firm belief support for them than what may be seen in the disagreements of scholarship. [For example see John Gee, "One Side of a Nonexistent Conversation," *FARMS Review of Books*, 15 (2003), no. 1, 81-5.]

3. The notion has often been circulated that Joseph Smith treated his own revelations as objects, which he could mold to suit the situation at will. That he took these revelations seriously as the word of God is illustrated by his response to his friends and followers during the persecution of the Mormons in Missouri:

I cannot learn from any communication by the Spirit to me, that Zion has forfeited her claim to a celestial crown, notwithstanding the Lord has caused her to be thus afflicted, except it may be some individuals, who have walked in disobedience, and forsaken the new covenant, all such will be made manifest by their works in due time. I have always expected that Zion would suffer some affliction, *from what I could learn from the commandments which have been given. But I would remind you of a certain clause in one which says, that after much tribulation cometh the blessing.* By this and also others and also one received of late, I know that Zion in the due time of the Lord, will be redeemed; but how many will be the days of her purification tribulation, and affliction, the Lord has kept hid from my eyes; and when I inquire concerning this subject, the voice of the Lord is: Be still, and know that I am God! all those who suffer for my name shall reign with me, and he that layeth down his life for my sake shall find it again. [HC 1:453, emphasis added; original from Joseph Smith letterbook 1, 71f, LDS Archives; see also commentary note 293 – White interview.]

4. However, as Hugh Nibley has pointed out, corroborating evidence for the Book of Abraham or Joseph Smith's interpretation of the facsimiles in the Book of Abraham must weigh much heavier in the scale of testimony than any alternate explanation, for the (secular!) probability of agreement is much smaller than that of disagreement. [ANP (conclusion), *Improvement Era*, May 1970, 86.]

5. There is good evidence linking the Book of Abraham with several classes of ancient literature about which Joseph Smith had no knowledge. We will mention some of this literature in the notes on the text. Does the existence of such connections to literature more than a millennium after the time of Abraham take the Book of Abraham out of the realm of the Abrahamic? Some may say yes. Others may of course discount an Abrahamic connection with the Book of Abraham completely (for example those who reject the historicity of the Genesis accounts of the Patriarchs or claim that the Book of Abraham contains significant, truly disabling, anachronisms. Such claims are sometimes motivated not by the desire to understand the text, but by a desire to "demythologize" Mormonism in general). The author holds the view that such connections to ancient literature, while they are not Abrahamic, *might* become such with further information. These close connections to ancient literature about Abraham can nevertheless be seen as

a support of Joseph Smith since he had no apparent knowledge of them. In the meantime, the author accepts Joseph Smith's pronouncement that the Book of Abraham is from Abraham even though there is no complete "paper trail" leading there. Such a paper trail exists nowhere in sacred Jewish, Muslim or Christian literature for example. Even in New Testament studies, we find the most extreme latitude allowed with regard to connections of New Testament literature to Jesus and the Apostles. Latter-day Saints can give some leeway to Joseph Smith and the Book of Abraham without fear of it being completely unprecedented in biblical studies or unsupported by scholarship. As for the OT, we are in many ways on remarkably equal ground in terms of manuscript source antiquity.

6. Nature abhors a vacuum and a rather curious analogue exists with some Latter-day Saints who are similarly impatient for irrefutable evidence of Joseph Smith's claims; sometimes they are willing to accept the arguments of critics without any consideration of the spiritual assurances they seem to have received in the past. [Alma 9:2-3, 6. Ezra Booth, *Ohio Star*, Oct., Nov. 1831, see Parkin, 1966, appendix.] Studies by critics are often promoted (by themselves) with a confidence which is anything but tentative; but if history teaches us anything, it is that all studies relating scripture and archeological/historical evidence are preliminary. The statement, *if Joseph Smith was a Prophet then the Book of Abraham is true*, is not falsified by arguing that Smith was not a genuine prophet of God, just the opposite is true. The only way such a proposition becomes interesting (for critics) is to *assume* that Smith was a prophet and then hope to arrive as some sort of paradoxical contradiction in relation to the statement above. Hence, the way to investigate Smith's claims is to assume he was telling the truth at the outset. For the critics, then, this naturally involves establishing that *the Book of Abraham is false*, something that readers will find cannot be done, it seems, under the present set of circumstances. Indeed, the reader will find that there exist compelling reasons to believe that this is true: at this point logical arguments for *the Book of Abraham is false* appear to fail miserably. This is not to say that a proof exists for *the Book of Abraham is true*. Some critics seem to want to engage *if Joseph Smith was a Prophet then the Book of Abraham is true* as a counterfactual. But counterfactuals are difficult to deal with in a consistent way, and logical consistency seems to be a kind of mantra for most of Smith's critics who are almost universally unable to spend any currency on revelation. Ironically, logical consistency seems in short supply for many of Smith's critics.

7. Facsimile is the name used by Joseph Smith for each of the three illustrations, which were published with the first printing of the Book of Abraham and continue to appear in the *Pearl of Great Price*. The name also appears in some manuscript versions of the Book of Abraham.

8. As we will see in the case of the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham, Smith's explanations touch on both Egyptian meanings and text transmission issues. The great logical difficulty is knowing in advance what the Egyptians believed before we can interpret the words we have in our translations of their writings. (See Bleeker, 1967, 1; Gee, 2005.) A feature of Joseph Smith's work ignored by many is that the scrolls in his possession (and now lost) were undoubtedly many generations removed from any autograph(s) produced by Abraham. [See notes given in the commentary concerning the original published introduction to the Book of Abraham which appeared in the *Times and Seasons* after the explanations of Facsimile No. 1.]

9. For example, *A Genesis Florilegium*, until recently, one of the unpublished "Dead Sea Scrolls" manuscripts. [See notes at (2:4).] The recent (2001) FARMS publication of ancient traditions about the early life of Abraham offers a number of sources unavailable in English previously. [See *TELA*, in the abbreviations section.]



10. D&C 91.

11. Critics of Joseph Smith assume the converse: the scripture was a product of his active imagination in support of his new doctrinal innovations. However, time is against this idea. The Book of Abraham text, at least through chapter 3, was produced in 1835 as we will show. It wasn't (publically) preached to any great extent for three more years apparently. [For reasons why, see Crawley, 1997, 14 and Crawley, 1980.]

12. For one example of this influence, see Hale, 1978, 5ff. Many of the key doctrines taught in Nauvoo are clearly related to the Book of Abraham. [See sermon of April 7, 1844 (*PJ* under date, or *WJS*) for remarks about restricting to Bible references.] Dahl and Cannon, [1997, vii] list the Book of Abraham as the second most common topic in Joseph Smith's teachings over his life-time of teaching. Joseph Smith generally related most of his teachings to New Testament passages, perhaps for the benefit of those new converts to Mormonism who were his listeners and to circumvent claims by some that his doctrines were "anti-biblical." For the same reason, Joseph Smith rarely engaged in technical distinction and definition. If he had done so, his sermons would have overflowed with them and his many new listeners would have been lost. Instead, he tended to repeat many of his most profound teachings in straightforward intuitive ways.

The persistent lack of appreciation of the deep influence of the book on Smith among the "diaspora" of Mormon splinter groups formed after Smith's death can only be attributed to a stunning lack of familiarity with the primary sources.

13. Hugh Nibley breaks down the task of beginning to understand the Book of Abraham into *ten* areas of study:

1. The texts of the (recovered) Joseph Smith Papyri.
2. The content and nature of the sn-sn [the Hor "Document of Breathing made by Isis for her brother Osiris"] fragment.
3. The "Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar."
4. Statements by and about Joseph Smith concerning the nature of the Book of Abraham and its origin.
5. The original document of Facsimile No. 1 with its hieroglyphic inscriptions.
6. The text of the Book of Abraham itself in its various editions.
7. The three facsimiles as reproduced in various editions of the Pearl of Great Price.
8. Joseph Smith's explanation of the facsimiles.
9. The large and growing literature of ancient traditions and legends about Abraham in various languages.
10. The studies and opinions of modern scholars on all aspects of the Book of Abraham.

This does not explicitly include doctrinal aspects of the book for which there is a large literature. While we cannot hope to deal with all these matters in detail here, we will at least try to introduce the reader to some of the literature. The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) has dealt with several of these issues in recent years including 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9. Others have recently contributed to the body of scholarship on the book. [See for example Coenen, 1995; 1998; 1998; 2004, 104; Depauw, 2003, 98-99.]

14. It is generally true that modern Church leaders have rarely if ever contradicted to the Church at large the doctrinal statements of Joseph Smith (teachings, for example, in the

areas of temples and Church organization have been expanded), some members and leaders have no doubt arrived at interpretations that differ from the ones we may offer. I have not attempted any sort of "doctrinal harmony" between what might be commonly believed among members of the LDS Church today and what the Book of Abraham says and what Joseph Smith apparently said about it. So this is perhaps not a "doctrinal" commentary in the sense that some members of the LDS Church might expect. The only currently authoritative doctrinal statements in the LDS Church come written over the signatures of the current First Presidency of the Church. The author knows of none of these that impact (in a contrary sense) what is written here.

15. Upon careful examination, it is easy to determine that while there are several manuscripts, the text itself has gone through little development. The differences between the "Kirtland" manuscripts, the "Nauvoo" and "Utah" manuscripts and the *Times and Seasons* first edition [TS-1] are essentially those of extensions (some are longer than others). Handwriting considerations and scribe availability show Warren Parrish, scribe for the longest ms, was involved after William W. Phelps, Frederick G. Williams and Oliver Cowdery, the other writers in the process that we know of. There are good reasons to suggest BAmS-2 (see Manuscript and Text Naming Conventions) is the earliest ms. It is sure that there were manuscripts produced in Kirtland which we do not have, in Kirtland. The known ms produced in Nauvoo is probably the printer's ms (pencil markings on BAmS-4 suggest it is part of a printer's ms) and since Joseph wanted to work on the Abraham translation in Missouri, it is perhaps conceivable that there was a Sidney Rigdon ms. Differences among the texts of the first edition and other major published editions, the (Parley Pratt) *Latter Day Saints Millennial Star* (Liverpool, England) edition [MS-1] from July 1842, the F. D. Richards' "Pearl of Great Price" edition from 1851 [MS-2], the Willard Richards 1855 "History of Joseph Smith" printing [SL-1] and the 1857 reprint in *MS* [MS-4], the Orson Pratt edition (1878) [SL-2], the 1882 Carrington edition [MS-6], the 1902 Talmage edition [SL-5], the 1907 reprint used by Spaulding [SL-7] and the 1921 [SL-14] and 1981 editions, are essentially cosmetic with a few exceptions (aside from degradation of facsimile quality before 1981 when the facsimiles were restored to original published condition). [See Appendix VI and Manuscript and Text Naming Conventions.] The narrative does not change except in very minor ways (spelling and punctuation for example). The translation effort is discussed in more detail in the text notes. Brian Hauglid's forthcoming critical text of the Book of Abraham as well as his critical edition of the Book of Abraham manuscripts will give much more detail on the evolution of the text. My thanks to Hauglid for correcting some of my errors in regard to the Book of Abraham manuscript materials, including dating issues regarding these materials and other matters.

16. See (Peterson, 1995) and text notes below.

17. It is impossible to collect all the parallels from old sources here. There are far too many to examine in the limited space and scope of this book. We choose only a few representative texts. For a more thorough examination of this aspect of the Book of Abraham, see Hugh Nibley's forthcoming book, *One Eternal Round* and John Tvedtnes' collection (Tvedtnes, 1999). For a sampling of Nibley's material in relation to Facsimile No. 2 see "Figure 6 of Facsimile 2," FARMS, 1995. Finally, the recently published *Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham*, [TELA] Studies in the Book of Abraham series, Vol. 1 (Tvedtnes, et al., 2001) should be consulted as a much more comprehensive collection of ancient and medieval traditions that relate to events in the Book of Abraham.

18. In any discussion of dating, the reader should always be aware of the difference between the date of a *manuscript* (a physical object) and the date of a *text* (what a ms

says). Having made this distinction between text and manuscript, we shall sometimes conflate the two (words), hopefully without confusion most of the time.

19. See for example, Abr. 1:28.

20. The word *criticism* as used here is not used in the sense of finding fault, but in the sense of analysis. Modern *biblical* criticism began in the 1870's. Classically, criticism is divided into "higher" and "lower" types. Higher criticism deals with authorship and content, lower criticism with form, language and syntax-style. Generally, an axiom of critical method has been that miraculous and prophetic events which seem to lie outside the known "laws of nature" are in part the product of long tradition manipulated over time. For example, the fact that the Book of Abraham confirms not only the historicity of Abraham himself, but seemingly also other "mythical" figures such as Adam or Noah, would constitute evidence that Joseph Smith was the author of the book, and that it is not historically authentic. Some have claimed that criticism based on the language, style and vocabulary employed in the Book of Abraham might be used to conclude the same thing. See Appendix V. Since at least some of the major questions criticism tries to answer are already answered for believers in a revealed document, it is of less importance to believers. [Cp. Barker, 1988, 3.]

As said above, an often *a priori* precept of criticism is that we are flying blind: there are really no such things as prophets in the sense commonly accepted by Latter-day Saints. It is interesting that some who style themselves as critical scholars of things Mormon are unwilling or unable to apply another of its axioms to their own work: being prepared to interpret the text against their own preferences and preconceptions. Ironically, the critical discipline is by nature one that is tied to faith as much as fact. [For some interesting views on criticism and the Abraham stories in Genesis see A. R. Millard, "Abraham" in *ABD* 1:39; and Kitchen, 2003; for the opposite view see Redford, 1992, chapter 14. For a Latter-day Saint perspective and concise history of the methods and philosophy of criticism see Sorenson, 1977.]

A thorough critical analysis of the Book of Abraham text will not be attempted here, but as we proceed, a few features that might provide a setting for the text are noted.

21. The actual writings of Abraham. No claim is made that any portion of the papyrus collection had by Joseph Smith contained an actual autographic ms of Abraham (as opposed to a text). There are various textual notes on this matter in the commentary. Also see Appendix V.

22. The *documentary hypothesis* is that the biblical record, in particular the books of Moses, are the result of a labyrinthine combination of several *traditions* or sources, the J or Yahwist source, the E or Eloist source, the P or Priestly source and the D or Deuteronomic source. Its special axe grinding identifies each source. Robert F. Smith has studied the text of the Book of Abraham in terms of text traditions and finds that it lacks the E source but has both J and P characteristics. [Robert F. Smith, "A Documentary Analysis of the Book of Abraham." See Barker, 1988 for how the D tradition may in part match the LDS idea of the removal of "plain and precious parts." Barker may be viewed as eccentric among some biblicists but her arguments are insightful, respected and worth reading; moreover she has an enviable command of the literature.]

23. For example see *TJPS*, 276-277, 137.

24. Joseph Smith, et al. from Liberty Jail, March 25, 1839, HC 3:295; D&C 88:118.

25. The *Times and Seasons* was the religious organ of the Church while the headquarters of the Church was in Nauvoo. Joseph Smith edited the paper during the time of the publication of the Book of Abraham. Joseph Smith carefully reviewed the text of the Book of Abraham before its publication. [See historical notes in the commentary below.]

26. Indicates chapter 1, verse 14. Dr. James E. Talmage introduced the present chapter and verse structure as part of his work on the 1902 edition of the *Pearl of Great Price*.

27. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comp. and ed., *The Words of Joseph Smith*, (Orem: Grandin Book Co., 1991).

28. B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed., (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1949-), seven volumes.

29. Joseph Fielding Smith, compiler, *Teachings of The Prophet Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938).

30. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984).

31. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992), first projected as nine volumes. The project has recently been restarted as a complete publication effort of Smith's papers. Part of the reason for quoting the source documents rather than the edited versions is found in Hugh Nibley, "The Way of the Church, Part I: Controlling the Past –I (A Consideration of Methods)," *Improvement Era*, 58 (January 1955), 45; also found in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 4, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987) 216-7.

32. It may seem strange to us in this day when information is so widely and rapidly disseminated that this wide availability has not always existed. For example, even though the early LDS Church had made unparalleled efforts in collecting and organizing historical data, the bulk of the sermons of Joseph Smith were inaccessible to Church members before 1900. Some Church members and leaders regarded those records of Joseph Smith's sermons that were available even after 1900 to be suspect partly because no stenographic records existed and generally multiple records of the same sermon were not well known (see for example James Duckworth to F. T. Pomeroy, letter dated February 9, 1929, B. H. Roberts papers, LDS Church *Archives* hereafter *Archives*. See also, Joseph Fielding Smith's introduction to *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*).

Even in Joseph Smith's day, many Church leaders (often called away long distances to do missionary, supervisory or public relations work for the cause) were often unaware of some of his public teachings and they were not distributed very well (although there is evidence of sharing of personal accounts of the Prophet's teachings). Short summaries of Joseph Smith's remarks were often all that were published and publications were generally hard to get following initial distributions. [See Dean Jessee's remarks, *BYUS*, 21, no.4, 259; also Jessee, *BYUS*, 31, no.2, 19ff.]

33. The author thanks Professor D. Lynn Johnson for allowing the use of his work here.