

## LDS Egyptologist Doubts Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Abraham from Egyptian Scroll

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Dr. Stephen E. Thompson holds a Ph.D. degree in Egyptology from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. He is the second LDS scholar to earn a doctorate degree in Egyptology. In a paper given at the 1993 Sunstone Symposia in Salt Lake City (August) and Boston (November) Dr. Thompson presented his reasons for concluding that Joseph Smith did not produce the Book of Abraham by translating it, as he claimed, from an Egyptian papyrus scroll he had obtained in 1835.

In the question and answer period that followed his paper at the Northeast Sunstone Symposium, Dr. Thompson was asked for his opinion of the book *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus* by Charles M. Larson (published in 1992 by the Institute for Religious Research, 1340 Monroe Ave. N.W., Grand Rapids, MI 49505). While he indicated that he does not endorse the book in its entirety, Dr. Thompson stated that:

*In my opinion, it's the best source to go to if you want to know what's been going on with the Book of Abraham .... Nothing that's been written from an apologetic point of view comes close to it in accuracy.*

What follows are a few excerpts from Dr. Thompson's paper, as well as the complete exchange from the question and answer period in which he comments on the book, *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus*. This was transcribed from a tape recording of his presentation available from the Sunstone Foundation. (An audiocassette recording may be ordered for \$7 from the Sunstone Foundation, 331 RioGrande St., Suite 206, Salt Lake City, 84101-1136, Phone: 800/326-5926. Request cassette #19 from the 1993 Northeast Sunstone Symposium.). Dr. Thompson's paper has subsequently been published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Spring 1995, pp. 143-160).

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### Excerpts:

"In the entry on the facsimiles from the Book of Abraham in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, we are told that the prophet's explanations of each of the facsimiles accord with present understanding of Egyptian religious practice. This is a truly remarkable statement in view of the fact that those Egyptologists who have commented on Joseph's interpretations of the facsimiles have stated emphatically that his interpretations are not correct from the perspective of the Egyptologist who attempts to interpret Egyptian religious literature and iconography as he or she believes the ancient Egyptians themselves would have. For example, in the famous pamphlet compiled by the Rev. Spalding in 1912, James H. Breasted, the first person to hold a chair in Egyptology in America, stated that Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles very clearly demonstrate that he was totally unacquainted with the significance of the documents and absolutely ignorant of the simplest facts of Egyptian writing and civilization. More recently, Klaus Baer, speaking of Joseph Smith's interpretations of the original Facsimile One in the accompanying text, noted that the Egyptologist interprets it differently, relying on a considerable body of parallel data, research and knowledge."

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"First, it is of vital importance to note that the originals of these facsimiles of the Book of Abraham were created for a specific purpose to provide for the successful transition to the afterlife of the deceased. While it is possible that some of these figures might appear in other contexts, and take on other meanings in those contexts, in the context of funerary papyri, their interpretation is limited to funerary purposes. The approach taken in attempting to support Joseph's interpretations of these figures is to compare them with figures found in other historical and textual contexts. It is simply not valid, however, to search through 3,000 years of Egyptian religious iconography in an attempt to find parallels which can be pushed, prodded, squeezed or linked to attempt to justify Joseph's interpretations."

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"One way to judge whether or not the Book of Abraham derives from an Abraham holograph is by whether or not the text of the book contains anachronisms. Of course, the first thing that has to be determined is when Abraham lived .... Many scholars would place this sometime during the first half of the second millennium, i.e., 2000 to 1500 B.C., while others would narrow the time frame within this period. In our search for anachronisms it would be safe to say that anything occurring after 1500 B.C. is definitely anachronistic to Abraham's lifetime. And since Abraham is portrayed as the first patriarch, anything occurring at the end of this period is probably anachronistic. What then

are the anachronisms which I believe can be identified in the Book of Abraham?"

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"From the foregoing discussion it would appear that if one accepts the date of sometime in the first half of the second millennium for Abraham, then there are four anachronistic names in the text; Chaldea, Potiphar, Egyptus, and probably Pharaoh. Pharaoh squeaks in there in the end. If you want to put Abraham in the very, very last possible period that you could squeeze him into you might be able to get him in there under the wire for Abraham. So that one is a probably. Since these are names it is not likely that they are translation equivalents of other words in the original text. If they are translation equivalents, they don't carry much meaning for us because they don't increase our understanding of the text. They certainly aren't good translation equivalents if they are such. I don't believe them to have been. I believe that there is sufficient evidence of anachronisms in the text of the Book of Abraham to conclude that it cannot be an actual Abraham holograph, i.e., that it was not written 'by Abraham's own hand upon papyrus.' "

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"In the preceding I have argued that: Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles are not in agreement with the meanings which these figures had in their original funerary context, anachronisms in the text of the book make it impossible that it was translated from a text written by Abraham himself, and what we know about the relationship between Egypt and Asia renders the account of the attempted sacrifice of Abraham extremely implausible."

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#### **Dr. Thompson's comments on the book, *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus***

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I had a question for Brother Thompson. Have you reviewed other work on this subject that might have taken place in the past? I gather you've been working on this for some period of time. But the reason I ask the question is because we received a book on this same subject. I can't remember, it was somebody like Carlson or-

THOMPSON: Larson.

AUDIENCE: Larson.

THOMPSON: By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus.

AUDIENCE: Yeah

AUDIENCE: Yes, unsolicited in the mail.

THOMPSON: Boy, I wish I could get on his mailing list. I had that, well somebody sent me that as a gift. But I don't know how you guys get free books. That's a good deal.

AUDIENCE: It was amazing to us but it seemed, you know, in general, I mean we're not specialists in Egyptology, but in general it seemed to at least come to about the same kinds of conclusions, certainly about it being from the Book of the Dead and that there was some Egyptologists involved in that book [c].

THOMPSON: Okay. Does everybody, everybody here know about that book or anything about this book? Book by a guy named Larson; can't remember his first — it's not Stan, I know Stan-

AUDIENCE: It's Anthony I think.

THOMPSON: Pardon?

AUDIENCE: I think it's Anthony.

THOMPSON: Anthony [Charles] Larson, and *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus*. And he sort of surveys the papyri, where they came from, how we got them, the finding of them. Then what Egyptologists maintain that they are and the apologetic approaches that have been taken to try and justify Jo[seph] Smith's interpretations thereof. This book has been reviewed in a book called — in a series called *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* (how it got in there, since it's supposed to be on books of Mormon — Book of Mormon — and not on Book of Abraham is an interesting question but it's there anyway) by two people, John Gee and Mike Rhodes. Mike Rhodes was the author of many of the statements that I took exception to in my paper. And they came from that review of this book. Now what I think of the book. Okay, the author was not an Egyptologist. He has a few facts wrong here and there; as he gets little things wrong every once and a while. They don't effect the gist of his arguments. In my opinion, it's the best source to go to if you want to know what's been going on with the Book of Abraham in [the] church. I mean, he has a pretty good summary of all the types of approaches that have been made. He does a pretty good job of explaining what they are, what the papyri are. He's [got] great pictures of the papyri. That's the nicest thing; he's got really — really neat photos of the papyri themselves. And people worry about the accuracy, is this book accurate or not. Well I'll tell you, he's far more accurate than anything Hugh Nibley ever wrote on the subject, okay. So if you're willing to read Nibley, you can read this guy and not worry about it. I mean, because Nibley is far, far more free with his treatment of primary and secondary sources than this guy ever would be. The only thing I don't like about, I wish he'd written the book and gotten rid of the last chapter, if I remember. Because that's where he says okay now if you've read this let's all become fundamentalist Christians. And he's, there's a thing to sign at the back and you know, if you've been saved as a result of this book, sign this and send it in and let me know. I mean his point of view is, as I gather from the book, his theological point of view is no stronger than

the one he's arguing against. Because he's essentially fundamentalist in his approach to the Bible and that appears in there as well. He has this statement about how, you know, that God would never use the Egyptian papyri as a means to communicate to Joseph Smith because God doesn't deal with pagan artifacts or pagan things, or whatever, and doesn't realize that there's an enormous amount of Egyptian influence in the Hebrew Bible as it stands. Which he would not accept given his fundamentalist approach to the Hebrew Bible. So that aspect of it is probably kind of off-putting to most members of the church. They read that and they go ugh, [t]. But other than that it's pretty good. I mean if somebody were to come up off the streets and say what can I read about the Book of Abraham? In fact, I just sent a copy of that to a young man in the Netherlands working on a dissertation on the first book of Breathing. And he didn't know anything about the Joseph Smith papyri so I sent him some stuff and I sent him a copy of the book. So, I would say read it and you'll get a great deal of benefit from it, just don't convert to his church. Ah -

AUDIENCE: So your impression was that he did his own Egyptology then?

THOMPSON: No, no he does not. He is not an Egyptologist. And his work is dependent on that of others. But he doesn't do a translation. He doesn't provide a translation of the Egyptian text. Ah, he does a brief commentary on the figures, most of it's pretty good. [A ] in a point here, point there he might be off. But as far as the general reliability of stuff goes that's written on the Book of Abraham he's right up there at the top. Nothing that's been written from an apologetic point of view comes close to it in accuracy. Because frankly, in my opinion, when you start doing apologetics you've got to twist the evidence. That what we have just doesn't support us. You've got to do something to it. You've got to manipulate it, you've got to move it, you've got to put quotes together from tops and bottoms of pages and stuff like that. So, that's my feeling on the book.