

When the Book of Abraham was first published in March 1842, the title of the work, as it appeared in the *Times and Seasons*, read thusly: “A TRANSLATION Of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands, from the Catacombs of Egypt, purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt, called the BOOK OF ABRAHAM, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.” (“The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704. This explanatory note has been published with the Book of Abraham, albeit with some alteration, down to the present (2013) edition of the Pearl of Great Price.) A look at the manuscripts of the Book of Abraham shows that this explanatory “title,” as it were, for the Book of Abraham dates to the earliest stages of the book’s production. Our earliest (surviving) manuscript for the Book of Abraham, which Brian Hauglid designates Ab1, and which the scholars at the Joseph Smith Papers Project date to “Summer–Fall 1835,” reads: “Translation of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand upon papyrus and found in the CataCombs of Egypt.” (Brian Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 61. To view the manuscript online, see “William W. Phelps and Warren Parrish Copy of Abraham Manuscript, Summer–Fall 1835 [Abraham 1:1–2:18]”: <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/william-w-phelps-and-warren-parrish-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-summer-fall-1835-abraham-11-218>.)

Critics of Joseph Smith have ridiculed the claim that the Book of Abraham was purportedly written “by his [Abraham’s] own hand, upon papyrus.” Charles Larson, for example, used this phrase sarcastically for the title of his 1992 anti-Mormon book attacking the Book of Abraham. ((Charles M. Larson, *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992). See John Gee, “A Tragedy of Errors,” *FARMS Review* 4, no. 1 (1992), 93-119; Michael D. Rhodes, “The Book of Abraham: Divinely Inspired Scripture,” *FARMS Review* 4, no. 1 (1992), 120-126.)) The criticism, as has been repeated in many parts of the Internet and beyond, usually runs something like this: (1) Joseph Smith claimed that the Book of Abraham was written “by his own hand, upon papyrus,” meaning Abraham himself handwrote the text Joseph Smith translated. (2) The surviving papyri fragments date to circa 200–150 BCE. (3) Abraham, by contrast, is usually dated to having lived circa 2000 BCE. (4) Therefore, Joseph Smith’s claim that the Book of Abraham was written “by his own hand, upon papyrus” is false. (5) Therefore, the Book of Abraham is not authentic, or, therefore, Joseph Smith was a false prophet.

This is, at least, what Joseph Smith’s more polemical critics allege. Others are somewhat more charitable to Joseph Smith, such as Stephen E. Thompson, who simply says, “In view of the fact that the heading of the Book of Abraham in the current edition of the Pearl of Great Price states that the text represents ‘the writings of Abraham . . . written by his own hand, upon papyrus,’ I believe it is likely that many members of the church believe that the Book of Abraham is the result of a translation of a direct Abraham holograph.” ((Stephen E. Thompson, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 153.)) Actually, I have to agree with this statement. It does seem to have been a common belief in the Church. However, as I hope to show, I believe this understanding of the Book of Abraham arises from some modern assumptions about what this phrase means, and instead wish to explore some alternative possibilities.

The first thing that we must address is whether this phrase “by his own hand, upon papyrus” was ever anciently part of the Book of Abraham (assuming that Joseph Smith translated an ancient text and did not receive the text by pure revelation). Hugh Nibley seemed to think so, and argued that the ancient name of the text would have been “the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.” ((Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd. ed. (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 4–9, quote at 5.)) If this is the case, then how are we to understand this claim that the text was written “by his own hand”? Must we assume that this implies the text was a holograph of the prophet Abraham, meaning Abraham himself sat down, reed pen and papyrus in hand, and jotted down the very manuscript received by Joseph Smith in 1835?

Not necessarily. As both Nibley and more recently John Gee have observed, the phrase “by his own hand,” or something like it, was used in ancient Egypt simply to denote authorship. ((Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 4–9; John Gee, “Were Egyptian Texts Divinely Written?” in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed. J. C. Goyon, C. Cardin (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 2007), 806; “Book of Abraham, I Presume,” online at <http://www.fairlds.org/fair-conferences/2012-fair-conference/2012-book-of-abraham-i-presume>.) The same is true,

actually, of some of the books of the Hebrew Bible. Consider these examples, all taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Malachi 1:1 – “An oracle. The word of the Lord to Israel **by** Malachi.”

Haggai 1:1 – “In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came **by** the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.”

Haggai 2:1 – “In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came **by** the prophet Haggai.”

Zechariah 7:7 – “Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed **by** the former prophets?”

Zechariah 7:12 – “They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit **through** the former prophets.”

The Hebrew text in each highlighted instance above literally reads “by the hand” (*b? yad*), even though it is rendered by modern translators as simply “by” (or, in the last case, “through”). The reason for this is obvious: this idiom (“by the hand of so-and-so”) is merely the ancient equivalent of the modern “by so-and-so,” as in “*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens,” “*Nathan der Weise* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing,” or “*The Call of Cthulhu* by H. P. Lovecraft.”

At this point it is worth briefly discussing some material brought to our attention by Gee earlier this year. In his article comparing the Book of Abraham to the “autobiography” of the ancient ruler Idrimi, Gee notes the following:

These ancient works are called autobiographies because they are presented as first-person narratives. Nevertheless, we do not know if such ancient autobiographical texts were written by the individuals themselves, dictated to scribes, or ghostwritten by scribes. Ancient Egyptian autobiographies, for example, can often be so formulaic that one might be forgiven for wondering if the individual is reflected in the text at all. In other words, it is unlikely that Idrimi carved the words on his statue, but he may have been directly responsible for the content of the text. ((John Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 35, notes removed.))

Turning to the “autobiography” in question, we read the following at the end of the text:

“Šarruwa is the official scribe. He has written, copied and reviewed (the text).

And now may the gods of heaven and earth keep Šarruwa, the scribe, who has written (the text of) this statue for him, in good health; may they protect him and be his guardian. May Šamaš, lord of the upper and nether worlds, lord of the spirits, be his protector. I reigned for 30 years. I inscribed my achievements upon my statue. Let [the people read it] and continually bless me.” ((Text located in Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” 37.))

Note how at the end of the text Idrimi, speaking in the first person, is said to have “inscribed[ed] my achievements upon my statue,” yet we know from just before that a scribe is writing the text. The same could easily be the case for the statement in the Book of Abraham that says it was “written by his own hand, upon papyrus.” Although an “autobiography” in the sense that it is written in the 1st person, the Book of Abraham could very well have been the

product of a scribe recording Abraham's material in a similar fashion to Šarruwa recording Idrimi's material.

But are the two texts really comparable? Some individuals on the Internet have challenged Gee's arguments on the grounds that the Book of Abraham seems to read too much like a modern autobiography. For a close look at "autobiographies" in the ancient Near East we turn to Edward L. Greenstein. ((Edward L. Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Volumes 3 & 4*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 2421–2432.)) Greenstein begins by explaining that "there is no 'autobiography' as such in the ancient world, if we describe 'autobiography' as the retrospective interpretation of the author's own life." ((Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia," 2421. Greenstein is not the only one to refer to Idrimi's text as an "autobiography." See, for example, J. J. M. Robert, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 4; Amanda H. Podany, *Brotherhood of Kings: How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East* (New York, N. Y.: Oxford University Press, 2010), 135. "Idrimi wrote an autobiography in which he described how he ultimately became vassal of Parattarna I. (Another man named Sharruwa was cited as author of this autobiography of Idrimi. Maybe Sharruwa was an ancient equivalent of a modern ghostwriter of speech writer, hired to put a sparkle in Idrimi's words." Notice how even when Podany says that Sharruwa was probably "the ancient equivalent of a modern ghostwriter," she still calls the text Idrimi's "autobiography." This is important, as some on the Internet have complained that Gee is out of line in calling Idrimi an "autobiography" like the Book of Abraham. Actually, as these three examples show, this word has been used by a number of writers to describe Idrimi's text. This complaint is really therefore only a case of special pleading and simply squabbling over terminology that is avoiding the real issues.)) That being said, Greenstein writes that "inner thought is, nevertheless, not altogether absent from autobiographical texts in the ancient Near East." As examples he cites the book of Nehemiah, the inscription of Azatiwada, and the account of Idrimi, which he refers to as an "extraordinarily personal account." ((Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia," 2421–2422.)) Speaking of the Idrimi autobiography, Greenstein informs us that the inscription "is autobiographical in character but not strictly autobiography; it may have been commissioned by Idrimi, but it was composed after his death." ((Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia," 2424.))

If we assume the Book of Abraham is a composition by the prophet himself, is it not possible, as previously suggested, that such a situation also took place, i.e., a scribe was employed to recount Abraham's adventures in the first person, just as it seems is the case with his contemporary Idrimi? If so, then the phrase "by his own hand, upon papyrus" need not be taken to mean anything more than authorship that is (ultimately) attributable to Abraham, whether he himself wrote the text, or commissioned a scribe. (As an aside, and very interestingly, Greenstein also notes that Idrimi's text is unlike any other Mesopotamian royal inscription, and that its closest parallels are Egyptian texts like the Story of Sinuhe. ((Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia," 2425.)))

What's the point of all of this? Kerry Muhlestein helpfully explained back in 2011.

Critics say that if this papyrus was written in the second century BC it could not possibly have been written by Abraham himself. In regard to this assumption, I ask, who said this particular papyrus was written by Abraham himself? The heading does not indicate that Abraham had written that particular copy but rather that he was the author of the original. What these critics have done is confuse the difference between a text and a manuscript. . . . A text, regardless of how many copies of it exist in the world, is written by one author. However, each copy of that text is a manuscript. The earliest known copies of the book of Isaiah date to hundreds of years after the prophet's death. Yet this has not led to the conclusion that Isaiah was not the author of the book of Isaiah. Clearly the manuscripts we have are copies of the original text that he wrote during his lifetime. We all know that when an author of the ancient world wrote something, if those writings were to survive or be disseminated, the text had to be copied again and again and again, for generation upon generation. When the heading states that the text was written by Abraham's own hand, it notes who the author is, not who copied down the particular manuscript that came into Joseph's possession. If critics had carefully thought through this issue, they would never have raised it. ((Kerry Muhlestein, "Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View," in *No Weapon Shall*

Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 230.)

But what if the phrase “by his own hand, upon papyrus” was not a part of the ancient title of the Book of Abraham, and instead is a modern component of the text? What does it say about the Book of Abraham if Joseph Smith or his associates assumed that the papyri they received in 1835 was literally written by Abraham himself—a holograph? Before we answer this, we need to see if there is evidence that suggests this is the case. As it turns out, there is some evidence that suggests Joseph Smith and the early Saints did believe the papyri they purchased in 1835 was as old as Abraham.

For example, a reporter for the *Quincy Whig* portrayed Joseph Smith as saying in an interview, “My time has been hitherto too much taken up to translate the whole of them, but I will show you how I interpret certain parts. There, said he, pointing to a particular character, that is the signature of the patriarch Abraham.” (“A Glance at the Mormons,” *Quincy Whig*, 17 October 1840; reprinted in Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham*, 218.) Wilford Woodruff, in speaking of the soon-to-be published Book of Abraham, wrote how impressed he was with these “Ancient records & Hieroglyphics as old as Abraham or Adam.” (Wilford Woodruff Journal, 19 February 1842; reprinted in Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham*, 220.) On the day of the publication of the Book of Abraham Joseph Smith himself spoke of “the Records discovered in Egypt some time since as penned by the hand of Father Abraham.” (Joseph Smith Collection, “Letters of 1842”; reprinted in Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham*, 221.) Finally, Josiah Quincy’s account of his 1844 visit with the Prophet includes a description of “some parchments inscribed with hieroglyphics [that] were then offered us. They were preserved under glass and handled with great respect. ‘That is the handwriting of Abraham, the Father of the Faithful,’ said the prophet.” (Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1926), 325–26; cited in John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 194.)

Although we must be cautious in evaluating this evidence, ((See the cautionary thoughts by Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 192–195.)) these statements seem to suggest that Joseph Smith and other early Saints understood the papyri to have been an Abrahamic holograph. If this is the case, then, as we asked earlier, what implications does this have for the authenticity of the Book of Abraham? Actually, I believe this evidence has little to no serious implications for whether the Book of Abraham is an authentic ancient text. All these statements tell us is what the early Saints seemed to assume about the Book of Abraham, not what the Book of Abraham says about itself. Joseph Smith’s or Wilford Woodruff’s or anyone else’s opinions have little bearing on authenticity of the text itself, in other words.

At this point the critic might object, “But Joseph Smith professed to be a prophet! Doesn’t the fact that he had incorrect assumptions, even about the scriptures he produced, cast doubt on his prophetic abilities?” The answer to this question depends on one’s assumptions about the nature of prophets. If one assumes that prophets must be perfect or infallible in order to be prophets, then the fact that Joseph Smith may have had faulty assumptions or incorrect beliefs becomes problematic. If, on the other hand, one does not assume that prophets must be infallible, then the answer is a simple no. Joseph Smith, imperfect though he may have been, was still inspired by God to bring forth new scriptures, and the truths and principles contained therein are for our benefit. Joseph Smith himself on a number of occasions disclaimed perfection, but did insist that the revelations and scriptures he produced came from God. (“I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught. Must I, then, be thrown away as a thing of naught?” Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 369, spelling and punctuation standardized.) The answer to this question, therefore, depends on one’s assumptions about the nature of prophets. ((See Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd ed. (Redding, Cali.: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2013), 29–41.))

Regardless of whether the phrase “by his own hand, upon papyrus” is ancient or modern, the evidence reviewed

here indicates that it can no longer be used as some sort of cudgel to beat the Book of Abraham with. If it was part of the ancient title of the Book of Abraham, as some have suggested, then there is no reason to take it to mean anything more than authorship (i.e. "by Abraham"). If it is a modern reflection of the beliefs of Joseph Smith or those who worked with him on the translation of the Book of Abraham, then all it tells is what these early brethren assumed about the nature of the Book of Abraham, not what the Book of Abraham says about itself.

There are still a number of critical issues in the debate surrounding the Book of Abraham, but this is not one of them.