

Mummies in America: Three Accounts

Before we discuss how the mummies got to Joseph Smith, we should mention three very interesting facts that Latter-day Saint students of the study will want to know. They compound the problem, but they also show that Michael Chandler has not on the spur of the moment made up the information he relayed to Oliver Cowdery!

First, in December 1833, a well-known Dr. Samuel George Morton of Philadelphia claimed to have dissected before the Academy of Natural Sciences on December 10 and 17 of 1833, in the presence of eighty members and others, a mummy "brought from the catacombs near Thebes by the late Antonio Lebolo of whose heirs I purchased it, together with the entire body." (Todd, p. 130.)

Second, outside of Baltimore, in a relatively direct line of travel between Philadelphia and Baltimore, where Chandler said he exhibited his mummies (see Chandler's placards, Times and Seasons, May 2, 1842), there is a small town called Bel Air. The newspaper of Bel Air, the Hartford Republican, of Thursday, May 23, 1833, carried the following item: "Nine mummies, recently found in the vicinity of Thebes, are now exhibiting at the Masonic Hall, Philadelphia." How many mummies do we really think are being exhibited in America in these selected months in these general areas? Did the American owners of Joseph Smith's mummies actually have eleven, which they gradually sell off, and by the time Chandler reaches Joseph Smith, has he only four left to sell?

Third, three months before Michael H. Chandler comes to Kirtland and sells his mummies and papyri to Joseph Smith, a letter is carried in a newspaper (the Telegraph of Painesville, Ohio, on March 27, 1835) near Cleveland that deals with the Chandler mummies. The letter has special significance to the Oliver Cowdery account: "Dear Sir: I send you a description of four Mummies, now exhibiting in this place. They were found in June 1832--three miles from Thebes, 236 feet deep in a catacomb or vault 94 by 18 feet. . . ." He also says, "This statement of the owner is accompanied by good authority." (Todd, p. 134; a unique description of the four mummies is also given.)

Obviously, there is much that we do not know about this whole episode. What actually did happen on June 7, 1831, as Oliver Cowdery reports--or in June 1832, as the Telegraph reports? Did some other discoverer find something that eventually gets to be part of the Chandler package of mummies? Second, even though researchers throughout Europe cannot abide the idea that Lebolo can have mummies that end up coming to the United States, the simple fact is that there are others besides the Mormons telling a similar story involving mummies acquired from Lebolo heirs. What does it all mean? It means that we still do not know all that we should like to know surrounding the mummies and papyri that the Prophet Joseph Smith is going to obtain.

Joseph Smith Acquires the Papyri

We have tired of the unknowns. Let us meet the one man we all wish to meet: Joseph Smith the Prophet. The Prophet has not told us what he felt when he saw the mummies or their papyri or how it is that he wanted to purchase the

mummies that Chandler brought to Kirtland in 1835. Oh, that we had his report! What we do know is that toward the end of June, Michael H. Chandler came to Kirtland to exhibit some mummies, four human figures, together with some two or more rolls of papyrus covered with hieroglyphic figures. In time he was brought to Joseph Smith, who shortly thereafter acquired the mummies. Why? I think the account by Elder Orson Pratt, although given years later, in 1878, provides the nearest thing that we have to an understanding of what really^{3 3-}_{4 3} occurred that early July day when Michael Chandler met Joseph Smith.

Elder Pratt says:

But it so happened that in traveling through the country, he (Chandler) visited Kirtland, Ohio, where the Prophet Joseph Smith resided, bringing the mummies and the ancient papyrus writings with him. Mr. C. had also obtained from learned men the best translation he could of some few characters, which however, was not a translation, but more in the shape of their ideas with regard to it, their acquaintance with the language not being sufficient to enable them to translate it literally. After some conversation with the Prophet Joseph, Mr. Chandler presented to him the ancient characters, asking him if he could translate them. The prophet took them and repaired to his room and inquired of the Lord concerning them. The Lord told him they were sacred records. . . . And he also inquired of the Lord concerning some few characters which Mr. Chandler, gave him by way of a test, to see if he could translate them. The Prophet Joseph translated these characters and returned them with the translation to Mr. Chandler; and who, in comparing it with the translation of the same few characters by learned men, that he had before obtained, found the two to agree. (Journal of Discourses 20:64-65.)

I marvel within when I read this account. For me, it not only gets to the heart of the book of Abraham matter, it also gets to the heart of Joseph Smith. Simply put: the Prophet sees some interesting things. Maybe he is prompted by a warm resounding within his bosom, but he wants to know what they represent. He goes to the Lord. It was the Lord who told Joseph Smith that they represented sacred writings. It was the Lord who knew the kind of translation that ignorant scholars would have come up with, and it was the Lord who supplied Joseph Smith with whatever it was that Michael Chandler would have felt good about.

The Prophet inquired about purchasing the papyri, but Chandler said it would detract from his exhibit to only have the mummies, and so the Prophet, perhaps with the help of others who may have assisted in the form of a gift-offering, purchased the mummies and papyri for \$2,400.

During the Joseph Smith Period

Following the purchase of the mummies and the Egyptian literature--which is what Joseph Smith was primarily interest in--there follows an event-filled seven-year period of Church history prior to the publication in March 1842 of the book of Abraham. The Prophet did not intend it that way, but events worked

against him. His diary entries as recorded in the History of the Church, tell a poignant story of the Prophet of the Lord anxious to be about his unique calling of restoring the doctrines of the Lord and establishing the kingdom of God on a firm foundation in these latter-days. The entry following that of July 5, 1835, but before the next entry for the ninth, tells an insightful story:

Soon after this, some of the Saints at Kirtland purchased the mummies and papyrus, a description of which will appear hereafter, and with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, etc.,--a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them. Truly we can say, the Lord is beginning to reveal the abundance of peace and truth.

The significant aspect of this account is that it is made no more than three days after the Prophet acquired the papyri--and probably represents much less time than he was able to spend examining the papyrus rolls. The Prophet certainly didn't learn Egyptian in less than three days! Throughout the remainder of the year, there are occasional references to the Prophet's finding time to turn to the subject of the papyri. On October 1, for example: "This afternoon. . .the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients unfoled to our understanding, the particulars of which will appear hereafter." In December of that year, the Prophet's scribe records: "Elders William E. M'Lellin, Brigham Young, and Jared Carter, called and paid me a visit with which I was much gratified. I exhibited and explained the Egyptian records to them, and explained many things concerning the dealings of God with the ancients, and the formation of the planetary system."

But these references really are limited in number. Why? Students of the Prophet's life know that during this period he is guiding the establishment of communities in Ohio and Missouri; he is overseeing the building of the Kirtland Temple; he is serving as President and main source of guidance and instruction to the kingdom of God, newly reestablished on earth again. When he does have time to "study," to "translate," he is also working on his "translation" of the Bible, known today as the Inspired Version; he is receiving other revelations, receiving other new scripture. He truly has little time to devote to the book of Abraham, which represents only one chapter of literally hundreds of other chapters in his experience of "translating" or "receiving" new scripture.

Thus, when he does find time to give to the writings of Abraham--in whatever form they may have been represented on the papyri, he approaches the task as he has others. Said Warren Parrish, one of his scribes during the fall of 1835: "I have set by his side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration from Heaven." (Painesville Republican, February 5, 1838.)

However, even through such a busy schedule, toward the end of 1837, the Prophet was ready to publish the book of Abraham. On November 2, the follow-

ing entry is in the History of the Church: "The Church voted to sanction the appointment of Brother Phineas Richards and Reuben Hedlock, by the Presidency, to transact business for the Church in procuring means to translate and print the records taken from the Catacombs of Egypt, then in the Temple."

But the 1837 apostasy in Kirtland, the financial reversal in the community and nation, the disaffection of leading brethren in the Church--Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, David Whitmer and others--the threatening of the life of the Prophet by apostates, the closing out of the Kirtland period, and the expansion of the Missouri period all suggest to the student of Church history where the attention of the Prophet was for the next five years. And, amidst it all, in the Saints greatest hour of need, seemingly, the Lord inaugurated a great missionary movement by calling most of the members of the Council of the Twelve to England to preach the gospel. Latter-day Saints know what happened during these next years: Missouri trials and tribulations; the Prophet in Liberty Jail; the founding and establishing of Nauvoo, Illinois; the building again of a city of God; and the further establishment of the Church--its doctrines, principles, practices, and organization.

Little wonder it is that the Egyptian mummies and papyri take a back seat to myriads of other more pressing concerns, as well as myriads of other scriptural understandings and new information that the Prophet was constantly receiving and exuding to the Saints.

However, throughout this whole period, the Saints had access to the mummies and papyri. There was early established a pattern of exhibiting the Egyptian antiquities to all who wanted to see them. In fact, such a curiosity and attraction were the mummies and papyri that a numberless stream of saints and neighboring non-Mormons constantly poured in upon Joseph Smith while he was in Kirtland in order that they might see the strange sights. Records indicate that Frederick G. Williams and his son carted the mummies and papyri around the Kirtland countryside, from community to community, and others--took them to Hiram and nearby towns. However, after the Kirtland Temple was completed in 1836, the mummies were exhibited in the Temple for all who wished to visit. Later, when the Prophet left Kirtland and went to Missouri, his parents took care of the Egyptian mummies and papyri and brought them west to Illinois. While the Prophet was languishing in Liberty Jail, his parents stayed the winter of 1838-39 in Quincy, Illinois, and openly exhibited the Egyptian items to the populace there. Once Nauvoo was established, the pattern was the same. Depending upon the living quarters, and exhibiting quarters, that were available, the Egyptian antiquities were exhibited in the Prophet's or his mother's home. Many are the accounts of persons who saw the mummies and papyri during this Nauvoo period. Particularly were they exhibited by the Prophet's mother as a "curiosity" to which tourists might pay a few coins to see, which money helped support the Prophet's mother.

But by February 1842 the Prophet was again turning his attention to the subject of Abraham. Three brief quotes by leading brethren of the day, although confusing in their terminology, suggest a clear picture:

Brigham Young--"I met with the Twelve at Brother Joseph's. He conversed

with us in a familiar manner on a variety of subjects, and explained to us the Urim and Thummim which he found with the plates, called in the Book of Mormon the Interpreters. . . .He showed us his seer stone." (Brigham Young Journal, December 27, 1841.)

Wilford Woodruff--"The Lord is blessing Joseph with power to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of God; to translate through the Urim and Thummim ancient records. . .old Abraham. . .which caused our hearts to burn within us while we behold their glorious truths opened unto us. Joseph the Seer has presented us some of the Book of Abraham. . . ." (Wilford Woodruff Journal February 19, 1842.)

Parley P. Pratt four months later wrote in the Millennial Star--"The record is now in course of translation by means of the Urim and Thummim. . . ."

Students of church history feel that these brethren probably confused their terminology. The intent of their comments, as Brigham Young accurately observed, was to show that the Prophet was receiving divine understanding through the seer stone in his calling as Prophet, Seer, and Revelator. As President Joseph Fielding Smith has written:

We have been taught since the days of the Prophet that the Urim and Thummim were returned with the plates to the angel. We have no record of the Prophet having the Urim and Thummim after the organization of the Church. Statements of translation by the Urim and Thummim after that date are evidently errors. . .The Urim and Thummim so spoken of, however, was the seer stone which was in the possession of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the early days." (Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, 3:225-26.)

The very important point of all this is to clearly show that the book of Abraham is coming from the Lord. Whatever the papyri may have had on them, whatever illustrations on them given to depict accounts that perhaps were being relayed in a degenerate, poorly written version--whatever it is that the scrolls may have had on them, including a version of temple endowments (see Nibley, The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri), they probably did not reflect the teaching or subject in as full and accurate manner as the Lord would have desired. As Warren Parrish noted in Kirtland and as Wilford Woodruff and Parley P. Pratt later noted, the Prophet Joseph Smith received his scripture and understandings from the Lord.

Seven years after the papyri came to Kirtland and seven years after Joseph's mind was turned to the things of Abraham as a result of seeing Facsimile Nos. 1, 2, and 3, the Prophet published what we call the book of Abraham. It was first published in the Times and Seasons in Nauvoo in two installments, on March 1 and March 15, 1842. The first installment consisted of Facsimile No. 1 and the text from chapter 1 to chapter 2:18. The second installment consisted of the remainder of the book except for Facsimile No. 3 on May 16, 1842.

Two interesting footnotes: Latter-day Saints will be interested to know that three prominent American newspapers regarded the publication of the book of Abraham as a major occurrence: The New York Herald, under James Gordon

Bennett, devoted a good portion of its editorial page to the Prophet and the book of Abraham in the Sunday, April 3, 1842, issue. Bennett even reprinted Facsimile No. 1 and the first installment, complete to chapter 2:18! The treatment was respectful and complimentary. Three days later, William Bartlett, editor of the Boston Daily Ledger, apparently recognizing the public interest in things Egyptian or things Mormon, announced that he too would publish the Prophet's translation. But he did better than Bennett. He front-paged the facsimile and the translation in his April 7 issue! He did the same for his Dollar Weekly Bostonian. The response stimulates wonder and amusement. Aside from the curiosity and public interest in things Egyptian, I suspect the Colonies just couldn't risk the possibility that Joseph Smith really could translate--and wouldn't it turn out to be a great step in establishing themselves as advanced as Europe! Such presumed subliminal psychological motivations, of course, are only fanciful. But what missionaries wouldn't give today for similar treatment.

The second footnote of real interest to Latter-day Saints is an article by John Taylor in the February 1843 Times and Seasons, wherein he says:

We would respectfully announce to those of our subscribers (and there are a good many of them), who commenced their subscription for the Times and Seasons at the time when Brother Joseph took the editorial department that the term for which they subscribed is nearly at a close; most of those commenced at the seventh and eighth numbers; at the time when the translations from the Book of Abraham commenced. This is the sixth number, which leaves only four weeks until the time that they subscribed for, will be fulfilled.

We have given this timely notice that our friends may prepare themselves. We would further state that we have the promise of Br. Joseph, to furnish us with further extracts from the Book of Abraham.

As all Latter-day Saints know, the further extracts never came forth, and persons familiar with the Prophet's last 1½ years will readily understand the reasons for his inability to complete the task. But there was more that the Prophet was ready to give us. Unfortunately, Carthage denied us many things.

After the Prophet's Death: Selling of the Artifacts

After the martyrdom, the Prophet's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, had ownership of the mummies and papyri and continued to exhibit them to help bring in support money. Due to the mob actions against the Nauvoo Saints, Mother Smith moved several times--to Knoxville, Webster, and Fountain Green--all in Illinois, but returned to Nauvoo and lived the remaining several years of her life with the Prophet's widow, Emma Smith Bidamon, until her own death on May 5, 1855. Mother Smith had stayed in the Midwest to look after Emma and her children, none of whom went west with the Saints. Following her death, the mummies and papyri went to Emma Smith, who held them a little over a year before selling them to a Mr. A. Combs, probably at the encouragement of her second husband,

Major L.C. Bidamon.

Before describing the final chapter in this long odyssey of the traveling mummies and papyri, a very important consideration presents itself. If the papyri were not important enough for the Council of the Twelve to insist upon obtaining for their transferal across the plains, one wonders about their actual, intrinsic significance. As has been shown, those close to the Prophet in the production of the book of Abraham have already commented about the Prophet turning to the Lord through the seer stone. Was the papyri story only a much-corrupted version of what had originally been written by Abraham--and thus, for his purpose, the Prophet could not use what may have been a papyrus rewrite of a rewrite of a rewrite, etc.? For me, this picture harmonizes with what we know about what the Prophet had, and with what the recently discovered papyrus fragments represent. To put this in further perspective, think how absolutely untenable it would have been to have left the Gold Plates in Nauvoo, had the Church had them. Such actual records, giving rise to a major new scripture, would have been regarded as the most important physical treasure of the Church, and seemingly, under no conditions would they have been left in Illinois for any purpose. For me, similar reasoning applies to the papyri. Fascinated as the Prophet was by them, intrigued as he was by languages, those close to him knew the source whence came the book of Abraham and apparently were not overly impressed with the Egyptian papyri themselves. Thus, the leaders of the Church could in good conscience leave the mummies and papyri to the care and keeping of Mother Smith, hoping the curiosities would bring a few visitors who would reimburse her accordingly.

Perhaps in a somewhat similar spirit, Emma Smith could also sell the Egyptian antiquities. And so, moving to the final chapters in this story, when the eleven fragments were discovered in the Metropolitan Museum of art in 1966, with them was found the following note of sale. The note sounds to me as if it were written for signature by Emma's husband, L.C. Bidamon:

Nauvoo City May 25/26

This certifies that we have sold to; Mr. A. Combs four Egyptian Mummies with the records of them These Mummies were obtained from the catacoms of Egypt sixty feet below the surface of the Earth, by the antiquarian society of Paris & forwarded to New York & purchased by the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith at the price of twenty four hundred dollars in the year Eighteen hundred thirty five they were highly prized by Mr Smith on account of the importance which attached to the record which were accidentally found enclosed in the breast of one of the Mummies. from translations by Mr Smith of the Records these Mummies were found to be the family of Pharo King of Egypt. they were kept exclusively by Mr Smith until his death & since by the Mother of Mr Smith notwithstanding we have had repeated offers to purchase which have invariable been refused until her death which occurred on the fourteenth of this month.

Nauvoo

Hancock Co. Ill May 26

(Signed)

L.C. Bidamon

Emma Bidamon former wife of Jos. Smith

Joseph Smith son of Jos. Smith

Within weeks or a few months, A. Combs had sold two of the mummies and some papyri to Mr. Edward Wyman, owner of Wyman's Hall or museum in St. Louis. By fall, the 1856 catalog carried the blurb:

These mummies were obtained from the catacombs of Egypt, sixty feet below the surface of the earth, for the Antiquarian Society of Paris, forwarded to New York, and there purchased, in the year 1835, by Joe Smith, the Mormon Prophet. . . .The body of one is that of a female, about forty--the other, that of a boy, about fourteen. They were kept by the Prophet's mother until her death, when the heirs sold them, and shortly thereafter were purchased for the Museum.

Some papyri is also described.

In 1863, the entire holding of the St. Louis Wyman's Hall were sold to the Chicago Museum--and with the holdings went Mormon mummies, papyri, St. Louis curator and all. There the two mummies and the portion of papyri acquired by Edward Wyman were exhibited until 1871. During that time, the Chicago Museum was sold to a Colonel John H. Wood, and the museum moved several times to different quarters within the city. The two mummies and papyri continued to be one of the many attractions in the museum until the Great Chicago Fire started on October 8, 1871, in a barn belonging to Patrick O'Leary, and, legend persisting, the fire apparently began because a cow kicked a lantern over and ignited nearby straw. It is said that of a population of 77,000, all but 7,000 were left homeless. The fire swept the city, leaving an estimated loss of \$187,000--and with it went whatever mummies and papyri that were in the museum.

For the next ninety-six years, it was generally thought by the membership of the Church that all of the mummies and all of the papyri had burned in the Chicago fire. But the 1967 announcement of the Church acquisition of eleven fragments of papyri changed all of that. Some scholars, principally Dr. James R. Clark of Brigham Young University, had begun to trace the mummies and papyri after they left Mother Smith and saw evidence that only a portion of the mummies and papyri had reached the Chicago Museum in the first place. So the 1967 announcement of eleven fragments of papyri being acquired by the Church firmly settled what had only been suspicioned--two mummies and who knows how much papyri are probably still in existence somewhere, their former history and records of acquisitions perhaps lost or unknown to present holders, or the items themselves perhaps long-since relegated to storage rooms.

In fact, it was in just such a setting that the eleven fragments now owned by the Church came to light. The story begins in early spring of 1966, when Dr. Aziz S. Atiya of the University of Utah's Middle East Center and an internationally-recognized historian of the Middle East was in the Metropolitan

Museum of Art "looking for documents, papyri, pictures, and illustrations to serve the book" he was writing.

While I was in one of the dim rooms where everything was brought to me, something caught my eye, and I asked one of the assistants to take me behind the bars into the storehouse of documents so that I could look some more. While there I found a file with these documents. I at once recognized the picture part of it. When I saw this picture, I knew that it had appeared in the Pearl of Great Price. . . . Now when I saw this, I began to search further. I saw more pieces of (Joseph Smith) papyri stacked together. . . . Another document was found with these documents, signed by Joseph Smith's wife, his son, and someone else. . . . (Todd, pp. 333-34.)

After a year and a half of negotiations, the eleven fragments were acquired by the Church on November 27, 1967, in New York. President N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency received the fragments for the Church.

How is it that these fragments came to be in the Metropolitan Museum of Art? According to the Museum's information, Mr. A. Combs apparently left some papyri to a much thought-of housekeeper, of unknown name.

This housekeeper, at her death, left the papyri to her daughter. The daughter, her married name Alice C. Heusser, came in 1918 to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, probably seeking to determine the value of her papyri. She did not sell the papyri in 1918. But by 1947, her widowed husband, Edward Heusser, perhaps ^{??} felt that the papyri had sat around long enough without paying for themselves, and in 1947 he sold the eleven fragments to the Metropolitan Museum of Art--
 twenty-nine years after the Museum first learned of them and twenty more years before the general membership of the Church learned of their existence.

Following this announcement, the Church Historian's Office informed the First Presidency that one small papyrus fragment (actually consisting of several smaller fragments pasted to a firmer backing) was in the Historian's Office, and it soon joined the other eleven fragments. This twelfth piece apparently was part of the inventory of Church property delivered to Newell K. Whitney in March 1847, and subsequently brought across the plains to remain in the Church Historian's Office until someone found it of interest.

This, then, is their long and fascinating odyssey--and one that surely is not over. What did A. Combs do with the other two mummies?--and the rest of the papyri? Time and research may surely tell. But although the outline on which to place the background mosaic of the story of the book of Abraham is fragmentary in places, let me clearly and unequivocally underscore the fact that as an article of personal faith I know that the book of Abraham is scripture to our dispensation. I know through the Spirit that it came through a prophet of God. I know that it is an important document theologically, and that it teaches great truths that broaden my soul, warm my heart, and bring me closer to the Lord. No amount of unfilled patches in the texture of the background story can alter those feelings and that deep personal conviction. It is a joy to try to find out more about how we received the papyri simply because those Egyptian hieroglyphics provided to the

Prophet Joseph Smith the opportunity to turn to the Lord to receive what Abraham really wrote.

Now, hopefully intrigued by an absorbing and complex background story, let us resolve to turn next to that small volume of scripture, most appropriately entitled the Pearl of Great Price, and read one of the most beautiful stories ever revealed to man.

Lest one be unfamiliar with the story, it is set in the ages of the past, and enchantingly, its first words begin: "In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my father, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence; and, finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers. . . ."

May we seek those blessings also.