

Article: JAM514

## WAS MIN THE TRUE GOD OF JOSEPH SMITH, JR.?

This article first appeared in the Effective Evangelism column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 31, number 2 (2008). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

There are few better tests of Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, claim to prophethood than that provided by his most unusual literary work: the small, five-chapter book tucked into the Pearl of Great Price titled *The Book of Abraham*. The reason for its value as a test of his claimed prophethood is not difficult to discern: he not only claimed at the time that the book was more than three thousand years old, but that he was able to translate a language (hieratic Egyptian) that at the time was only beginning to be understood by a small number of scholars.

Earlier in his life, he made the same claim regarding the much longer Book of Mormon, the official scripture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormon or LDS Church), but the original "golden plates" of that work, he said, had been taken back to heaven, so the "translation" could not be tested. The papyri Smith translated as *The Book of Abraham* is available to us today and we know without question that it is nothing but a common Egyptian funerary text.

We do not have to delve into the translation of hieratic Egyptian, however, to use *The Book of Abraham* to help free a person from false faith in Joseph Smith as a prophet. *The Book of Abraham* contains graphics copied *by hand* from the original papyri. Smith provided interpretations of these illustrations, and today we can test his inspired interpretations against the conclusions of many decades of archaeological and linguistic study.

**Smith's Egyptian Fascination.** In 1835, Michael H. Chandler arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, in his horse-drawn wagon carrying four Egyptian mummies and displays of papyri rolls that had been found on the mummies. Joseph Smith was fascinated by Chandler's exhibit, so much so that his fledgling church purchased the display from Chandler for \$2400, a large sum of money in his day. Joseph Smith said, "Soon after this, some of the Saints at Kirtland purchased the mummies and papyrus...and with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, 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." (*Documentary History of the Church* [DHC], 2:236).

Smith was claiming to be able to translate what was, for all practical purposes, an unknown language. That Smith was indeed claiming to translate in the normal sense of the term can be seen from his own words: "The remainder of this month, I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the *Book of Abraham*, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients" (DHC, 2:238). One clearly does not create an "alphabet" of a language one is not actually reading, yet Smith continued "working" on getting the "inspired translation" of the *Book of Abraham* over the course of nine years.

*The Book of Abraham* is the only book of LDS scripture that contains illustrations in the form of "facsimiles," each with an "explanation" provided by Joseph Smith. Since the actual papyri were thought lost (some of the original papyri were found in 1967 and turned over to the LDS Church), the "facsimiles" provided the only means of testing Joseph Smith's translation, and his understanding of the documents.

**Smith's Illustration Misidentification.** Since an in-depth discussion of the papyri of the *Book of Abraham* is beyond the scope of our purposes here,<sup>1</sup> we instead will look just at Facsimile 2, and more specifically, at one section of this drawing and what it *really* means.

Is this indeed a representation of the one true God sitting on His throne revealing the grand keywords of the priesthood? Was Joseph Smith able to decipher Egyptian writings in a time when scholarship was just starting to get a clue on the topic?

The object that Joseph Smith included in the Book of Abraham is, in reality, a *hypocephalus*, a common item of Egyptian funeral literature (all of the facsimiles in the Book of Abraham are drawn from common Egyptian funerary documents). It was placed under the deceased person's head, and was to aid the person in making the journey through the netherworld by bathing his or her body in light. Many examples of this kind of hypocephalus have been found. One of the pagan gods pictured in this hypocephalus is shown above as it appears in the current edition of the LDS scriptures. Egyptologists tell us that this is the god "Min." Min is an "ithyphallic god," that is, a sexually aroused male deity, as the picture clearly indicates. Min is the god of the procreative forces of nature. Joseph Smith said that the Egyptian god Min was in point of fact the one true God.

And what is Min doing? Joseph tells us that he is revealing the grand Key-words of the priesthood, with the sign of the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove before him. In reality, he is holding up the "divine flail" in one hand and is being approached by the figure Joseph Smith identified as the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove. Joseph's hypocephalus was damaged at the border so that only the head of the "dove" was visible, so Joseph had to restore the picture, but he did not do so correctly.

The figure above provides us with the proper scene from another hypocephalus (Leyden AMS 62). The being that is approaching Min is not the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove; it is yet another ithyphallic figure, specifically, a serpent, probably the Egyptian God Nehebka, presenting to Min the wedjat-eye, the symbol of good gifts.

LDS scholar Hugh Nibley wrote:

As the supreme sex symbol of gods and men, Min behaves with shocking promiscuity. His sacred plants were aphrodisiacal...and he is everywhere represented as indulging in incestuous relationships with those of his immediate family; he had a numerous and varied religious entourage... consisting mostly of his huge harem...The hymns, or rather chanting of his worshippers were accompanied with lewd dancing and carousing...to the exciting stimulus of a band of sistrum-shaking damsels. (Abraham in Egypt, 210)

Remember that Joseph Smith said that this figure represented God sitting on His throne! Incredible as it may seem, intelligent, well-read LDS are aware of the true nature of the hypocephalus, including the presence of Min and Nehebka (the vast majority of LDS, however, are not). How do they explain this? Mormon Egyptologist Michael Dennis Rhoades said, "Joseph Smith mentions here the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove and God 'revealing through the heavens the grand key-words of the priesthood.' The procreative forces, receiving unusual accentuation throughout the representation, may stand for many divine generative powers, not least of which might be conjoined with blessing of the Priesthood in one's posterity eternally" (*BYU Studies*, Spring 1977, 273).

In other words, the God of Mormonism is sexually active, begetting children in the spirit-world. (Mormons often describe God's power as being made of the power of the priesthood and the power of procreation.) Since Min obviously is sexually active as well, this then is the "connection."

**Smith's Information Transformation.** To the truth-seeking individual, Joseph Smith was ignorant of what was represented in the Egyptian papyri. Incapable of translating the language, and completely ignorant of the nature of the documents, he made things up as he went along, claiming God's direction and inspiration as his guide. In the process he demonstrated his own inability as a "prophet, seer and revelator," for he grossly misidentified each of the items not only in this facsimile, but in the other two as well.

Joseph Smith's defenders today seek to find any connection whatsoever between LDS belief and Egyptian religion, even to the point of seeing in the sexually aroused Min a picture of God on His throne. To grasp at this straw, however, is to ignore the biblical testimony to the one true God. Isaiah saw God on His throne in Isaiah 6:1-10, but instead of lewd girls surrounding Him and dancing, the angels surrounded

Him and cried, “Holy, holy, holy.” God describes the gods of Egypt as “idols” that tremble before Him (Isa. 9:1); God will capture these false gods in His wrath (Jer. 43:12). God reveals the worship of these gods to be an abomination that brings His wrath (Jer. 44:8), and mentions one Egyptian god by name in speaking of the punishment He will bring against Egypt (Jer. 46:25). Those who worship such gods are “defiled” in God’s sight (Ezek. 20:7–8). The Bible has nothing but contempt for the gods of Egypt, which would include the abominable figure of Min, identified by Joseph Smith as his God.

**No Comparison.** Being able to contrast the God of Joseph Smith with the true and living God of Scripture is fundamental to effective evangelism with the Mormon believer. What makes this comparison effective is the fact that every Mormon you will speak to owns the LDS scriptures and can turn in those scriptures to the Book of Abraham and verify that everything reproduced in this article is found in their text. So even if they refuse to take a tract from you, it is highly unlikely they are going to leave their scriptures behind. That means every time they open that book, they will know there is a portion toward the back that proves Joseph Smith was not who he said he was and that while there is a clear similarity between the pagan god Min and the Mormon doctrine of God developed in the later years of Joseph Smith’s life, there is an equally clear dissimilarity between the God of the Bible and either Min or the Mormon god.

It is that kind of opening that has caused many to start listening to what Christians have to say with a more open mind. This article forms the substance of a tract that was highly effective in opening conversations, and keeping others from joining the LDS Church.

— James R. White

## NOTES

1. For an in-depth examination of the papyri themselves, and the devastating case they make against Smith as a prophet, see Charles M. Larson, *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus* (Grand Rapids: Institute for Religious Research, 1992).