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The Joseph Smith Papers Project Stumbles

John Gee

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John Gee

Review of *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, eds. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2018), 381 pages.

Abstract: *Volume 4 of the Revelations and Translations series of the Joseph Smith Papers does not live up to the standards set in previous volumes. While the production values are still top notch, the actual content is substandard. Problems fill the volume, including misplaced photographs and numerous questionable transcriptions beyond the more than two hundred places where the editors admitted they could not read the documents. For this particular volume, producing it incorrectly is arguably worse than not producing it at all.*

The Joseph Smith Papers Project has developed a well-deserved reputation for excellence in every aspect of publication. Fantastic photographs, faithful transcriptions, helpful notes, and top-quality paper and bindings have all been standard issue. This is a tremendous heritage to live up to, and each new volume comes out with eager anticipation.

The volume under review, Volume 4 of the Revelations and Translations series, contains a number of documents that have been known to historians for at least fifty years, but many of them have never been properly published and have never before been officially published. The volume begins with a lengthy introduction that attempts to set the documents into historical context. This is followed by the individual documents with accompanying short introductions. The documents are organized into groups: Egyptian papyri (pp. 3–24), Notebooks of Copied Egyptian Characters (pp. 25–41), Copies of Egyptian Characters (pp. 43–52), Egyptian Alphabet Documents (pp. 53–109),

Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language (pp. 111–90), Book of Abraham Manuscripts, circa July–circa November 1835 (pp. 191–242), Book of Abraham Manuscripts, circa February–circa 15 March 1842 (pp. 243–93), and Facsimile Printing Plates and Published Book of Abraham (pp. 295–335). Reference material at the end of the volume includes Book of Abraham Chronology for the Years 1835 and 1842 (pp. 338–40), Works Cited (pp. 341–49), and Comparison of Characters (pp. 350–80). References for the Introduction are given as footnotes, but references in the other sections are gathered as endnotes at the end of each section. This makes references difficult to locate, although that may not be a bad thing. Readers should carefully note that the list of works cited is not a comprehensive bibliography on the volume’s subject matter and is thus missing several major works.

On the surface, this volume appears to conform to the standards of the previous volumes, but in the details that is not the case. There is much in the volume with which one could and perhaps should quibble. I will not be able to spend much time on the numerous questionable editorial decisions or scholarship evident in the volume. I will, however, note that the editors chose to completely relabel the documents from their historical names, which will sow much confusion in discussions, but they provided no concordance of other major labels for the documents, as is standard in scholarly editions. Instead, I will simply list a sample of known problems in the volume.

I have previously done a letter-by-letter transcription of the documents based on high-resolution photographs and personal examination of the original documents utilizing the transcription standards used by ancient historians¹ rather than those of the modern American historian that the Joseph Smith Papers used. The practices of the two types of historians differ in a number of particulars but might be generalized by saying that ancient historians prioritize what the scribe actually wrote on the document while American historians prioritize the perceived scribal intent. For this volume of the Joseph Smith Papers, the alternative, ancient standard is arguably preferable for the following reasons:

- Many debates about the documents revolve around scribal practices but these debates are poorly served by American historian standards where the discussion of scribal practice is

1. I use the term *ancient historians* to encompass a variety of disciplines dealing with ancient languages like Akkadian, Egyptian, Greek, and Coptic which share similar transcription practices.

infrequent and are better served by the ancient historian standards where discussions about scribal practice are commonplace.

- Many of the groups of letters in the documents are clearly not English and one cannot argue that one is following scribal intent if one cannot understand what is being written and, thus, what the scribe's intent was. In the documents in this volume of the Joseph Smith Papers the scribes' intent and the authors' intent are hotly debated. Transcribing according to the scribes' intent is begging the question and subtly predetermining the outcome of the debate.
- The stated audience of the Joseph Smith Papers is scholars, not lay members of the Church. Presumably a scholar should not be spending too much time puzzling over the spelling of "behod" in context, but perhaps I have spent too much time working with documents having non-standard spelling and other scholars find unusual orthography to be a serious obstacle.
- Interesting and perhaps important aspects of the documents may be glossed over by using the standards of the American historian. For example, the Book of Abraham manuscripts in Willard Richards's hand may have served as the printer's manuscript, but Richards's handwriting is difficult to read and this may explain why there are numerous unnoted retouchings of letters in an unknown hand throughout the manuscripts to make words legible.

Space does not allow listing all the problems in the volume nor even all the problems I know of (though others using differing standards may not consider them errors by their standards), so a smattering from each section will have to suffice. I will address each section, in turn.

Introduction

The volume's Introduction is a fair summation of the current state of research as far as American historians are concerned. The problem with this sort of general introduction in an area where much active research is being done is that it is bound to become out of date quickly. This introduction probably will not age well. An indication of this is that it has something of a split personality. For example, "the Egyptian-language manuscripts created by Smith and his associates while they worked with the papyri from July through about November 1835 give the only firsthand, contemporaneous evidence of how they understood the

Egyptian language” (pp. xxiv–xxv). “But most of the Book of Abraham is not textually dependent on any of the extant Egyptian-language documents. The inverse is also true: most of the content in the Egyptian-language documents is independent of the Book of Abraham” (p. xxv). So the only firsthand, contemporaneous evidence for the translation process is independent of — and thus irrelevant to — the Book of Abraham and its translation. There is a problem with the editors’ logic here that may be the result of many revisions during the volume’s development.

Papyri

There are more competent treatments of the papyri than presented here. The placement and grouping of the fragments on pp. 6–7 are incorrect and should not be followed.² On p. 9, the fragments are presented in the wrong order; the photographs should be switched, as the lower one comes first on the papyrus. On p. 16, the text claims, “The right half, known to scholars as fragment IV, measures, at its largest, $11\frac{1}{2} \times 8$ inches (29×20 cm), with a backing of the same size.” Unfortunately, on the facing page (p. 17) there are no right and left fragments. Also, scholars know the piece as Joseph Smith Papyrus IV or P. Joseph Smith IV, not as “fragment IV.” If scholars know the papyrus fragment as something, why did the editors decide not to follow suit? Likewise, “The upper left half, known to scholars as fragment II, measures $5\frac{1}{8} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$ inches (13×27 cm), with a backing measuring $4\frac{7}{8} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$ inches (12×27 cm).” There is no left fragment, and if it were placed correctly, it would not be “upper.”³

Notebooks of Copied Egyptian Characters

If the editors’ assumptions about the translation process were correct, one would have expected that Joseph Smith and others would have copied characters before they started providing translations. The perceptive reader is left to puzzle over the placement of these two sections, but since the editors do not actually know the chronological order of the

2. For competent placement, see Michael D. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tschemmin and Neferirnub: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 8. This placement is more detailed than the one in John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 12–13.

3. For comparison, see: P. Berlin P. 3008, P. Dublin MS 1669, P. Paris Louvre N. 3086 + P. St. Petersburg 2565, P. Paris Louvre N. 3089, P. St. Petersburg 3531, P. Turin 1833, P. Cincinnati 1947.369 + P. Cologny CV + P. Denver 1954.61 (formerly An 178), P. Detroit 1988.10 + P. Eggebrecht, P. Grabung Anch-Hor Reg.Nr. 873, P. Leiden T 16 (AMS 41), P. London BM EA 9902, P. London BM EA 10097.

documents or the actual relation of one set to another, or even if the various sets are correctly grouped, one order is as good as another. We can, however, look at the transcriptions. Selecting one page at random, we find the following errors: On p. 35, sideways sum, for “ϕ 22 ½” read “22 ½.” There is no illegible character in the final line of the sum (the final numbers are the total after a subtraction); it belongs to the writing that is supposed to be the next line. The next line does not read “H Dayton”; it looks more like “H Daytal,” but *daytal* is such an obscure word that we would not expect to find it here even though the context might fit it. The photograph provided is inadequate to resolve the issue. In the lower section, for “Translation” read “Translatean” which is what is actually written on the document.

Copies of Egyptian Characters

The editors date the copying of Egyptian characters to early July based on their assumptions rather than any evidence. The only reference to transcribing Egyptian characters in Joseph Smith’s journals is 26 November 1835, which unfortunately does not match with the editors’ date for these documents.⁴ So the editors’ theory inexplicably takes precedence over the only historical evidence we have. The document on p. 47 is upside down; this has been corrected in the online version. The document on p. 49 is upside down in comparison to the photograph of the same document on p. 9. This might confuse some readers. The editors doubtless meant to draw attention to the characters copied in ink rather than the papyrus fragments, although this is not explicitly stated.

Egyptian Alphabet Documents

This date provided for the Egyptian Alphabet documents by the editors does not match that provided by Joseph Smith’s journals, which indicate a specific date for these documents (1 October 1835).⁵ Earlier editors of the Joseph Smith Papers assigned this date to the document,⁶ so one would expect a note explaining the change from previous conclusions in the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

Again, transcription is an issue in this section. For this section, we pick one page at random (p. 58) and note the following transcription errors:

4. *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 110–11.

5. *Ibid.*, 67.

6. *Ibid.*, 67 n. 46.

- Line 7: For “{◊\B}ethcho” read “Bethcho.” There is no overwriting on the character although there is some touch-up. The scribe attempted to write the B with a loop at the bottom as on the previous line but needed to do so with two strokes of the pen, the second of which is slightly smeared.
- Line 7: For “fi{◊\f}th” read “fi{a\f}th”
- Line 9: For “injoym{◊\e}nt” read “injoym{e\ a}nt”
- Line 11: For “resides” read “reside<s>”
- Line 12: For “Kah-tu-ain-tr{◊\i}eth-” read “Kah-tu-ain-tra<eth> -”

There are also worrying problems in the description of the documents. The editors state that the documents contain “hieratic and unknown characters in unidentified handwriting (likely JS and possibly Cowdery)” (p. 55). I grant that the editors can specify the English handwriting on documents but there is no way of knowing who wrote the Egyptian characters on the document, so the proposed scribal identifications are simply guesswork or speculation on the part of the editors.

Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language

This document has long been claimed to be the key document for the understanding of Egyptian by Church leaders in Kirtland. The authorship of the document is unknown. The transcriptions here are also a problem. Again, we pick a page at random (p. 134–35).

- Line 5: for “government,” read “government.” The punctuation is a period, not a comma.
- Line 7: for “desendent from” read “desendemt fron”
- Line 14: for “another” read “anothr”
- Line 15: for “{it\ a}nd” read “{it\ A}nd”
- Line 16: for “above, more” read “above, mor<e>”
- Line 19: for “possessions” read “possession<s>”
- Line 20: for “possession” read “possessionian”
- Line 27: for “I{◊◊\at}a” read “I{to\at}a”
- Line 32: for “Hoe-oop” read “H{a\o}e-oop”
- Line 33: for “dominion” read “dom<i>nion”

Book of Abraham Manuscripts

The manuscripts of the Book of Abraham have been published before by one of the editors. Unfortunately, these documents are also plagued by transcription problems. Again, we use a random page, p. 261, which contains the following transcription discrepancies:

- Line 1: For “Behold Potiphars” read “Behod Potiphas”
- Line 9: For “descendant” read “{d\<d>}escendant”
- Line 10: For “canaanites” read “canaanite<s>”
- Line 11: For “{s\{S}}prang” read “{S\{s}}prang”
- Line 12: For “canaanites” read “c<a>naanites”
- Line 13: For “~~prerevd~~” read “~~prer~~ved”
- Line 15: For “~~Zep~~-tah” read “{G\Z}~~ep~~-tah”
- Line 16: For “~~Ege~~ptah” read “Egeptah<us>”

Out of 147 words on the page, 9 (6%) can be transcribed differently. Each of the next two pages numerically has even more.

Footnotes

The footnotes on the volume are sometimes suspect. The editors claim that “the volume was used extensively when JS and his associates published Facsimile 2 and its accompanying explanation in March 1842” (p. 113). The endnote cited (p. 185 n. 20) refers the reader to p. 276. On p. 276, the editors assert, “No evidence indicates that JS studied any of the hieroglyphs from the hypocephalus in his 1835 effort to understand the Egyptian language. However, the explanation of Facsimile 2 is clearly related to that effort, since some of the entries in this document borrow heavily from the Grammar and Alphabet volume.” One could argue that the effort flows the other way around. This is an example of an unexamined and unsupported assumption of the editors. At no point do the editors provide an argument or justification for their assertion.⁷ It also contradicts the assertions of the editors in the Introduction, cited above.

Comparison of Characters

Throughout the volume, the editors decided to give their own numbering to the Egyptian characters in the margin. There are already standard

7. This point was brought to my attention by my colleague Kerry Muhlestein.

Egyptological (Gardiner) numbers for most of these characters; it is a pity that the editors did not use the standard scholarly conventions. The problematic nature of this appendix is illustrated on p. 370 in the character labeled 3.11a,b. The first, second, third, and sixth character are the same two characters (C98+A21A) from Joseph Smith Papyrus I. The fourth and fifth in the list come from Joseph Smith Papyrus XI and are not the same characters (V2+Z3).

Presuppositions

Everyone approaches a text with certain presuppositions that inform how they understand the text. It would have been nice if the editors had been more explicit about theirs. As it is, the text often leaves the reader to intuit what the presuppositions of the editors were. Certain statements allow one to reconstruct some of the editors' presuppositions. Reconstructing presuppositions can be hazardous, but authors can avoid others reconstructing their assumptions by making them explicit.

The editors assert that Joseph Smith and his associates “assumed that the Egyptian language contained a series of complex systems and symbols, each of which held multiple meanings” even though the editors cannot “explain comprehensively the ways in which earlier concepts regarding the Egyptian language — such as the notion that each character represented multiple ideas — may have been inherited, used, or understood by Joseph Smith” (p. xvii). They also assert that “these attempts [by Joseph Smith and his clerks] are considered by modern Egyptologists — both Latter-day Saints and others — to be of no actual value in understanding Egyptian” (p. xxv). They claim that Joseph Smith “was certainly unequipped to translate the scrolls as a scholar would” (p. xxii). The assumption seems to be that Joseph Smith got all his ideas about Egypt from his environment except correct ones. Not all of the ideas about ancient Egypt circulating in Joseph Smith's day were wrong. For example, hieroglyphic signs in the time period when the Joseph Smith Papyri were produced frequently have multiple meanings. To be able to sort the issues out requires a firsthand knowledge of the intellectual content and context which, in this case, means a knowledge both of Egyptian and how it was understood in Joseph Smith's day. Unfortunately the editors demonstrate no firsthand knowledge of works by Samuel Sharpe, Gustav Seyffarth, Jean-François Champollion, or others, so they cannot set the work of Latter-day Saints like W. W. Phelps in its proper historical context.

One of the assumptions is that the authorship of the documents included in the volume belongs to Joseph Smith. In fact, the authorship of the documents is disputed, something the volume never acknowledges. Others have put forth historical arguments that W. W. Phelps, not Joseph Smith, authored many of the documents published in the volume. These arguments are ignored. The volume should have followed the standard practice of the Joseph Smith Papers Project and put most of the documents in an appendix as disputed. For instance, in a forthcoming Joseph Smith Papers volume a much-quoted letter from Joseph Smith to Nancy Rigdon is placed in an appendix because the editors cannot prove that it is not a forgery. The same procedure should have been followed here. If the policy is that only those documents known to be authored by, in the handwriting of, or in the possession of Joseph Smith should be included in the papers, then only the Joseph Smith Papyri, Egyptian Alphabet A, and the Book of Abraham manuscripts should have been placed in the volume and the rest should have been relegated to an appendix. This, however, did not happen.

Another of the assumptions is revealed in the organization of the volume. Although the editors state that “the sequence of the creation of the Kirtland-era Book of Abraham manuscript and the various manuscripts of the Egyptian-language project is unknown” (p. xxv), readers can easily assume a chronological order in their presentation of the material. For them the chronological order of the documents is first the papyri, next the notebooks of characters, then the pages of characters, then the Egyptian alphabet, then the Grammar and Alphabet, then the Book of Abraham manuscripts, and finally the published editions of the Book of Abraham. The organization of the volume, while logical, implies the ordering of the documents favored by critics of the Church but this order is not necessarily supported by the dates given by the editors. If the documents of disputed authorship had been placed in an appendix, this would have solved the problem.

This order is assumed and not demonstrated. This is the way the editors would go about producing a translation: get a document, obtain some grammars, and after studying the grammars, produce a translation. But this is not the way that ancient languages are deciphered, and it was not the way that Champollion deciphered Egyptian. There is no particular reason to assume that it was the way Joseph Smith translated, since it was definitely not the way the Book of Mormon was produced.

The editors’ assumption about the order of translation is manifest in a number of ways. For example, the Egyptian Alphabet documents

seem to parallel Abraham 1:24–25, 31. One could argue either that the Abraham verses were produced from the Egyptian Alphabet documents or that the Egyptian Alphabet documents were produced from the Book of Abraham. Because of their theories about the translation process, the editors assume the former. The fact that five verses are missing in the Egyptian Alphabet documents makes it harder to account for their appearance in the Book of Abraham than if the Book of Abraham were used to produce the Egyptian Alphabet.

The source of the characters in the manuscripts also presents a problem. The characters in the margins of the Book of Abraham manuscripts come from Papyrus Joseph Smith XI. The characters in the Egyptian Alphabet documents and the Alphabet and Grammar come from Papyrus Joseph Smith I. Because to the editors the characters are meaningless marks on the page, they pay no attention to their origin or the implications of their origins, which explains why they lump different characters from different sources indiscriminately together in their appendix and misplace some of the photographs. If the Egyptian Alphabet documents were the direct source of the Book of Abraham, we would expect that the characters would coincide and have the same source, but they do not. Because the characters do not match, the efforts to match up characters in the Egyptian Alphabet documents and the Book of Abraham manuscripts have to be seen as independent efforts. It also suggests that both efforts are attempts to match a previously existent Book of Abraham with different papyri rather than stumbling attempts to decipher a particular Egyptian text.

Furthermore, the editors' presuppositions dictate what can be counted as evidence. Thus, when the editors state that "there is no evidence before early 1842, however, that JS had translated more Book of Abraham material than what survives in the extant Kirtland-era manuscripts" (p. 243), they are ignoring a great deal of evidence that others have adduced for precisely the idea that Joseph Smith had translated more of the Book of Abraham than that at that time.⁸ They are also ignoring both the evidence of the manuscripts and the journals. Joseph Smith's Kirtland period journals record him

8. See Kerry Muhlestein and Megan Hansen, "'The Work of Translating': The Book of Abraham's Translation Chronology," in *Let Us Reason Together: Essays in Honor of the Life's Work of Robert L. Millet*, ed. J. Spencer Fluhman and Brent L. Top (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 139–62; John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 16–19.

translating on 7 October 1835, 19 November 1835, 20 November 1835, 24 November 1835, and 25 November 1835. This is a minimum of five sessions. In Nauvoo, there is only a day and a half of translation. According to the editors, in Kirtland, only Abraham 1:1–2:18 were dictated, while in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith translated Abraham 2:19–5:21 — a greater amount of text in only a quarter of the time. Even with the editors' naturalistic presuppositions, this requires a stretch in credulity.

In these cases, the editors are driven by their presuppositions and theories, regardless of evidence to the contrary.

Conclusions

Given the constraints of space, this is only a sample of the types of problems and errors found in the volume.

It may seem that some of these matters are mere trifles. I disagree. The bedrock of the work on the Joseph Smith Papers Project is the transcription of the documents. Especially in these manuscripts where so many of the words in the documents do not purport to be English and the editors have no idea what the language may be, accurate transcriptions are essential. It is thus disappointing that there are so many problems with the transcriptions. It is incredibly easy to make transcription errors in a document in one's own language when one is doing a quick first draft in a limited time when visiting an archive. Throw in bad handwriting and a foreign language, and the difficulties multiply. But the authors have been working on this volume for seven years. One expects better. The 213 unique instances in the documents where the editors admitted they could not read what the scribes wrote⁹ is an indication of the difficulty in reading the documents and how often the challenge of transcription defeated the editors. Though some of these instances would defeat any responsible scholar, some of them can be read.

Furthermore, many of the arguments about the translation of the Book of Abraham rest on scribal practices, habits, and tendencies. To study these properly requires much greater care in transcribing the

9. The instances of problems reading what scribes wrote is pervasive across documents: Notebook of Egyptian Characters (2), Egyptian Alphabet A (11), Egyptian Alphabet B (16), Egyptian Alphabet C (22), Egyptian Counting (3), Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language (101), Book of Abraham Manuscript A (9), Book of Abraham Manuscript B (15), Book of Abraham Manuscript C (13), Book of Abraham Manuscript and Explanation of Facsimile 1 (13), Explanation of Facsimile 2 (5), and Book of Abraham Manuscript 8 (3).

documents and much higher standards in document transcription than evidenced in the work shown here.

Anything the editors say about Egyptian language, papyri, or characters is beyond their skill and training. It is regrettable that although The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints counts several faithful Egyptologists among its membership, the editors deliberately chose not to involve them in any serious way. It is true that two of that number were given a month to peer review the volume and some of their suggestions were accepted, but no photographs were included in what was reviewed, nor did the Egyptologists see the appendix on the Egyptian characters. One might argue that this series is about nineteenth-century religious history, but this volume, in particular, is about early Latter-day Saint leaders' involvement with Egyptian characters. The volume editors cannot adequately deal with early Latter-day Saints' interaction with those characters without some understanding of those characters of their own.

In sum, this volume does not display the care one has come to expect from the Joseph Smith Papers Project. The editors may have followed the general guidelines of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, but the material in this volume is not like the other material in the series and would have benefited by adapting the guidelines to the nature of the material. While it is great to have good-quality images of the documents finally available to the public, the transcriptions and notes are often inadequate to the needs of the ongoing debates about the documents. One still needs to be extremely careful using the material. This means that other than legal access to the photographs, neither the serious researcher nor the lay person is in a better position than they were before the volume was published. As the online version will be updated to reflect new information, it may become, over time, the preferred version to use.

[Editor's note: This review was edited by the author, after initial publication, to address multiple requests for clarification. In part, these clarifications came after a substantive conversation between the author and principal figures in the Joseph Smith Papers Project.]

John Gee is the William (Bill) Gay Research Professor in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University.