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Taking Stock

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TAKING STOCK

John Gee

Abstract: *In a response to my review of their Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts volume, the series editors of the Joseph Smith Papers provided feedback and commentary on two important items. There are other, unaddressed issues this rejoinder examines.*

I am grateful to the editors of the Joseph Smith Papers for their thoughtful response to my review¹ and to the editors of *Interpreter* for allowing me to write this rejoinder. The American historian Peter Novick noted when he was invited to respond to reviews of his work, “There is nothing more tedious than the spectacle of disgruntled authors complaining that they have been misrepresented or, even worse, whimpering that they have been ‘misunderstood.’ Academic authors, above all others, should be immunized from such concerns, after years of seeing the versions of our lectures we get back in blue books at the end of the term.”² I hope I do not fall into that trap.

The series editors of the Joseph Smith Papers are good men. I have enjoyed working with them in the past and hope to do so in the future. They are intelligent, conscientious, sincere, faithful, skilled, and generally thoughtful and competent. Overwhelmingly, the Joseph Smith Papers Project is a testament to the skills of the respective authors and editorial teams. Having said that, JSP-R4³ has academic failings. Due to the limited space accorded me in this rejoinder, I cannot further detail them

1. John Gee, “The Joseph Smith Papers Project Stumbles,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019), 175–86, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-joseph-smith-papers-project-stumbles/>.

2. Peter Novick, “My Correct View on Everything,” *American Historical Review* 96/3 (June 1991): 699.

3. *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), hereafter referred to as JSP-R4.

here. However, a more comprehensive response to these shortcomings will appear in future publications. In this rejoinder, I will take stock, generally, of where discussions of these issues stand at the moment.

Unaddressed Issues

While I appreciate the time and care the series editors took to craft their response, they addressed only a subset of the concerns raised in the reviews by Jeff Lindsay⁴ and me. In addition to the lack of response to some of the technical errors in JSP-R4 that I pointed out in my review, several problematic editorial decisions remained unaddressed in the response:

- **Placement and Grouping Issues.** The response notes that an upside-down image in JSP-R4 (p. 47) was caught immediately after publication and corrected in the online errata. This is commendable, but the response glosses over my comments regarding the placement and grouping of the papyri in the printed volume. It is the entire purpose of a book review to make readers aware of such issues in the book being reviewed.⁵
- **Dating Issues.** In my review, I claimed that the volume “editors date the copying of Egyptian characters to early July based on their assumptions rather than any evidence.”⁶ There was no response to this important concern, as there was not for my comments regarding the dating of the Egyptian Alphabet documents.⁷ The dates used by the volume editors do not match the Joseph Smith journals or statements made by volume editors in previous volumes of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, a fact not noted anywhere in JSP-R4.

4. Jeffrey Dean Lindsay, “A Precious Resource with Some Gaps,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019), 13–104, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-precious-resource-with-some-gaps/>.

5. Further, the online version has its own problems, including an image that is sideways. See <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/egyptian-papyri-circa-300-bc-ad-50/15>.

6. Gee, “The Joseph Smith Papers Stumbles,” 179.

7. Ibid.

- **Editorial Bias.** The series editors assert the ideal of neutrality in the production of JSP-R4.⁸ They state that “the question of how and when Joseph translated the Book of Abraham is a complex one — but it is not the question that this volume strives to answer.” Despite this assurance, there are several examples (some of which I pointed out) where the volume editors made unsupported assumptions about the translation process. As I observed, some of these assumptions are implicit in how they chose to organize the documents in the volume.⁹ These demonstrable concerns remain completely unaddressed.
- **Ignoring Evidence.** In my review, I cited the volume editors’ claim 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). However, as I pointed out, a statement of this sort can be made only if one turns a blind eye to evidence adduced by scholars that does not agree with the claim.¹⁰ Readers should be made aware that the volume editors completely failed to mention evidence and arguments that differ with their personal perspectives.

I realize that it would have been difficult for the series editors to address every specific issue within their response. However, saying nothing at all about these significant, unaddressed categories of shortfalls might lead some readers of the response to incorrectly assume that the scope of controversy remains limited to the circumscribed set of items mentioned in the response.

Issues of Disagreement

There were two points addressed by the series editors where we simply do not agree:

8. Neutrality in reconstructing history is an unattainable ideal. Historians, despite desires and assertions to the contrary, approach source documents with presuppositions and biases that are impossible to remove from the product of their work. That is reality; it is true of all historians, including those who created JSP-R4.

9. An examination of representative examples can be found in Gee, “The Joseph Smith Papers Stumbles,” 181, 182–85.

10. *Ibid.*, 184.

- **The Concordance.** The series editors rightly note my observation that the volume abandoned traditional numbering of the historical documents in favor of a new numbering system.¹¹ They attempt to resolve this concern by asserting “misaligned expectations” on my part. Because I have worked extensively with these documents, it is not difficult for me to correlate references to a given document across different numbering systems. However, other readers may have more difficulty than I do, and noting what would have been a helpful addition is well within the purpose of a book review. Pointing out that a cross-referencing aid for the traditional and new referencing systems in a book review seems no more a case of “misaligned expectations” than it would be for a reviewer of a Joseph Smith Papers volume on revelation manuscripts to note that correspondences between the original manuscript revelation books and important publications derived from them ought to be included as a help to readers. (Thankfully very useful cross-referencing aids were made available in the Joseph Smith Papers volumes on the revelations of Joseph Smith.¹²)
- **Transcription Issues.** In their response, the series editors make a very strong claim that a “few of [my] twenty-three alternative transcriptions may be correct under a different system of transcription, [but] none represents an actual error in our volume, and many are likely the result of his working with images of the documents rather than the documents themselves.” Perhaps the series editors missed my statement that my transcriptions were based not only on high-resolution photographs but also on “personal examination of the original documents.”¹³ Most disciplines — though, regrettably, the series editors’ response notes that American history is not one of them — have productive ways to make use of independent collations. I am sorry that for manuscripts

11. Ibid., 181–82.

12. See, e.g., Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Manuscript Revelation Books, Facsimile Edition*, eds. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 690–705.

13. Gee, “The Joseph Smith Papers Stumbles,” 176.

as complex and controversial as those contained in JSP-R4 this option was not considered. Ironically, an independent collation of an early Latter-day Saint manuscript published on the Church History Library website recently provided an important and hitherto unutilized witness to the translation of the Book of Mormon.¹⁴

On these issues we shall have to agree to disagree.

The Avoided Issue

In my review I limited my discussion to academic concerns; I deliberately did not address the potential consequences of the volume for faith. One recent survey claimed the most significant historical or doctrinal reason why individuals leave the Church is because of doubts “about the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham,” significantly outranking the concern over Joseph Smith’s polygamy.¹⁵ If this is true, then JSP-R4 is arguably among the most important volumes within *The Joseph Smith Papers*. Jeff Lindsay addresses this issue in his review and his rejoinder, so I will not do so here. For my own part, I would have expected the volume editors to be more concerned about this than they appear to have been.¹⁶

Conclusions

As should be obvious to readers of this rejoinder, the most troubling problems raised in my original review were left unaddressed in the series editors’ response. Despite these remaining concerns, I am grateful they took the time to address both intellectual and spiritual concerns. In this respect, they were “standing in” for the volume editors on whom the

14. See my further discussion about this in “Edward Stevenson’s Journal Entry about Martin Harris,” *Studio et Quoque Fide* (October 29, 2019), <http://www.studioetquoquefide.com/2019/10/edward-stevensons-journal-entry-about.html>.

15. Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 223–24.

16. There is much relevant and pointed counsel in Boyd K. Packer, “The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect,” *BYU Studies* 21/3 (1981): 1–18. If that seems too far removed, similar council is found in Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century,” *BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Annual Report 2018* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2019), 8–21. Additionally, Elder Holland’s address can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpUN29orJmM>.

primary responsibility for any defects in JSP-R4 rests. It is my sincere wish that these defects will be explicitly acknowledged and repaired.

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