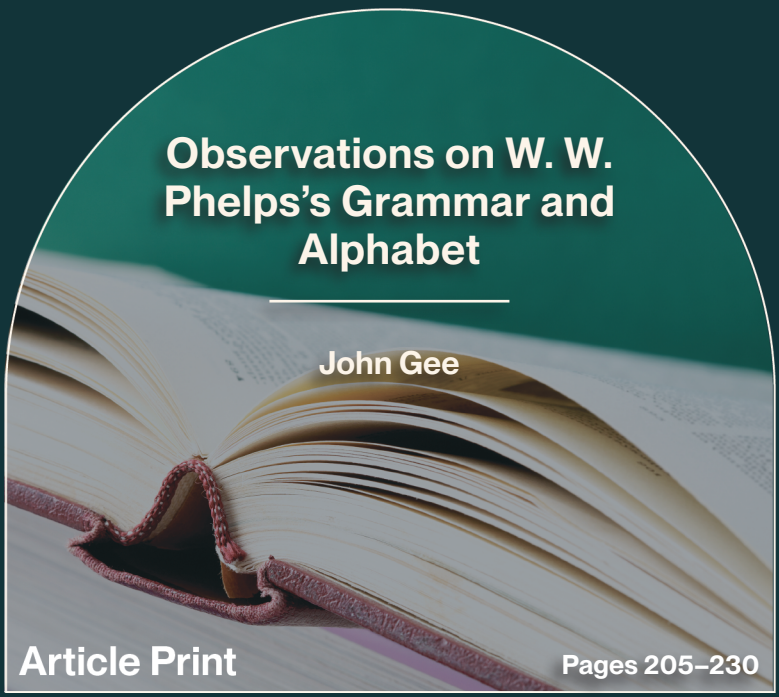
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Observations on W. W. Phelps's Grammar and Alphabet

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Observations on W. W. Phelps's Grammar and Alphabet

John Gee

Abstract: *The Grammar and Alphabet, often attributed to Joseph Smith, is demonstrably the work of W. W. Phelps. Attributions to Joseph Smith are based on a single late reminiscence, which was not authored nor approved by Joseph Smith. The notion that the Grammar and Alphabet was used to translate the Book of Abraham is not founded on any solid evidence. This creates an ironic situation: attempts to connect this work with the manuscripts of the translation of the Book of Abraham ignore the evidence of the Egyptian characters on the very manuscripts. Nevertheless, despite the Grammar and Alphabet being the work of Phelps, it does contain some Egyptian, as well as Greek. There is demonstrable English influence on the reconstructed language, though the syntax is Latin. The Egyptian Counting document, on the other hand, is actually based on English, rather than Egyptian. None of this is a problem for the translation of the Book of Abraham, because the Grammar and Alphabet is entirely the work of W. W. Phelps.*

Because prophets commune with God, those who follow them often have the natural desire to have more of their wisdom and more of their words. One of the potential consequences of that desire is to uncritically accept works of uncertain origin and attribute them to the prophet. Such works may be works of their followers (and thus follow the same or similar systems of thought), innocently misattributed to the prophet rather than the disciple, or forgeries intentionally put forward in the name of a prophet.

An example of this kind of forgery is when an author took the

philosophical tractate *Eugnostos the Blessed*, rewrote it to appear as if Jesus spoke it after his resurrection, and titled the result the *Sophia Jesu Christi* (the Wisdom of Jesus Christ). One can also see this in the case of the sayings of Muhammad which circulated after his death. Scholars like Al-Buhari collected these and evaluated them according to various criteria, then discarded the ones that failed to meet those criteria. Many of those discarded were possibly attributed to Muhammad innocently.

In the case of Joseph Smith, two of the works that have been incorrectly attributed to him are not originally his: the *Lectures on Faith*, written by Sidney Rigdon,[1] and the Grammar and Alphabet, which was authored by W. W. Phelps. We will consider the latter as it pertains to Phelps's attempt to reconstruct the Egyptian language.

Authorship

The Grammar and Alphabet is a bound volume in the Church History Library (CHL ms. 1295 fd. 1), largely in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps, with some additions in the hand of Warren Parrish. The volume was brought west by W. W. Phelps and Willard Richards, who were Church historians. The bound volume has about as many designations as it does authors who write about it. We will refer to it by the original title, though correcting its spelling to "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language," and shortening it to "Grammar and Alphabet." Other writers have sowed confusion by renaming the bound volume or abbreviating it (such as GAEL or EA). For the sake of clarity these anachronistic designations will not be used. The volume contains thirteen smaller documents, with a number of blank pages in between. While the Joseph Smith Papers project calls the bound volume either "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language" or "Grammar and Alphabet," it does not note the blank pages between the individual documents in the volume. The individual documents, using the original labels, are described in table 1.

Attributing the Grammar and Alphabet to Joseph Smith is usually done by assumption, rather than by an argument supported by evidence. The evidence that the Grammar and Alphabet was authored by W. W. Phelps is as covered in the following sections.

1. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Case for Sidney Rigdon as Author of the Lectures on Faith," *Journal of Mormon History* 31 (2005): 1–41, hdl.lib.byu.edu/1877/3456.

Table 1. Internal Grammar and Alphabet documents.

Document Label	Written Pages	Blank Pages	Reference
Grammar and Aphabet [sic] of the Egyptian Language	7	26	*JSP-R* 4:116–29[2]
Bethka	1	0	*JSP-R* 4:130–31
Egyptian Alphabet fourth degree	3	6	*JSP-R* 4:132–37
Bethka	1	0	*JSP-R* 4:138–39
Egyptian Alphabet third degree	2	6	*JSP-R* 4:140–43
Egyptian Alphabet Second Degree	4	11	*JSP-R* 4:144–51
Bethka	1	0	*JSP-R* 4:152–53
Egyptian Alphabet first degree	3	15	*JSP-R* 4:154–59
Second part 5th Degree	4	12	*JSP-R* 4:160–67
Second part 4th Degre	2	22	*JSP-R* 4:168–71
Second part of 3rd Degree	2	22	*JSP-R* 4:172–75
Second part 2nd Degree	2	22	*JSP-R* 4:176–79
Second part of the Alphabet 1d Dgree	2	38	*JSP-R* 4:180–83

The handwriting

The document is largely in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps. True, Phelps did serve as a scribe at times for Joseph Smith, but he was also a prolific writer in his own right. For example, fifteen of the hymns in the 1985 hymnal were written by Phelps. Because he served as a scribe and also authored his own material, handwritten material in his writing is a necessary but not sufficient condition for it to be Phelps's work. On the other hand, since Joseph Smith used many scribes, something being in Phelps's hand is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for considering it to be the work of Joseph Smith.

Phelps's time as scribe

Late 1835 is one of the best-documented periods of both W. W. Phelps's and Joseph Smith's lives. It was one of the few times in his life when Joseph Smith was keeping a journal and, during this time, W. W. Phelps was in Kirtland away from home and writing almost weekly

2. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts, The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2018). Referred to throughout this paper as *JSP-R* 4.

letters to his wife in Missouri. Furthermore, because we can identify the handwriting of Joseph Smith's scribes, we can learn which men were serving as his scribes, and when. We will examine when W. W. Phelps served as scribe in 1835 and 1836, and then see where the Grammar and Alphabet fits into those years. We will first examine the evidence from Joseph Smith's papers and then from the letters of W. W. Phelps.

W. W. Phelps served as a scribe for documents of Joseph Smith that are dated 1 June 1835,[3] 2 June 1835,[4] and 15 June 1835.[5] Phelps apparently served during the translation of the Book of Abraham in July, as he wrote his wife in September of that year: "Nothing has been doing in the translation of the Egyptian Record for a long time, and probably will not for some time to come."[6] With the exception of one date in October, he is not otherwise known to have served again as a scribe until 6 August 1836.[7]

Joseph Smith recorded in his journal five further instances when he and Phelps worked together:

- On 1 October 1835, Joseph wrote that he labored with Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps on "the Egyptian Alphabet."[8] These are the same three individuals in whose handwriting are three documents, each labeled "Egyptian Alphabet."[9] The conclusion requiring the fewest assumptions is that these three documents were produced by those three individuals on 1 October 1835. The Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language, in the handwriting of Phelps and Warren Parrish, matches neither in the exact title nor in the

3. Matthew C. Godfrey et al., eds., *Documents, Volume 4: April 1834–September 1835, The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 329–33. Hereafter referred to as *JSP-D* 4.
4. *JSP-D* 4:333–39.
5. *JSP-D* 4:346–47.
6. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 11 September 1835, quoted in Bruce A. Van Orden, "Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters," *BYU Studies* 33, no.3 (1993): 563, byustudies.byu.edu/article/writing-to-zion-the-william-w-phelps-kirtland-letters-18351836.
7. Brent M. Rogers et al., eds., *Documents, Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838, The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017), 277–78. Hereafter referred to as *JSP-D* 5.
8. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839, The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 67. Hereafter referred to as *JSP-J* 1.
9. *JSP-R* 4:56–71, 74–83, 86–93.

handwriting and thus is not a possibility for "the Egyptian Alphabet." If "Characters, transliterations, and definitions from the Egyptian Alphabet documents were later copied into the Grammar and Alphabet volume,"[10] then the Grammar and Alphabet must date after the Egyptian Alphabet documents and, by logical extension, should date the Grammar and Alphabet after 1 October 1835.

- On 23 October 1835, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, Hyrum Smith, John Whitmer, Sidney Rigdon, Samuel H. Smith, Frederick G. Williams and W. W. Phelps were involved in a prayer meeting.[11] The agenda of items covered does not seem to include translation.
- On 29 October 1835, Joseph Smith records "Br W. Parish commenced writing for me."[12] After engaging him as a scribe, Joseph Smith and Warren Parrish went to visit Frederick G. Williams to fetch Joseph's "large journal."[13] At that point, Edward Partridge and W. W. Phelps joined them and the four "examined the mumies" after which Joseph Smith and Parrish "returned home and my scribe commenced writing in <my> journal a history of my life."[14] This document survives and from the handwriting and the description left in the journal, we know that Parrish wrote less than a page on that day.[15] Since Parrish had just been hired as Joseph Smith's scribe and commenced work that day, we should not expect that Joseph Smith would have been writing anything with Phelps after he had just hired a new scribe.
- On Sunday, 1 November 1835, Joseph Smith was in the congregation when W. W. Phelps preached.[16] A large amount of Church business was transacted that day, but translation is not listed.
- On Sunday, 8 November 1835, Joseph Smith publicly

10. *JSP-R* 4:xv.
11. *JSP-J* 1:73, 111–12.
12. *JSP-J* 1:76.
13. *JSP-J* 1:76.
14. *JSP-J* 1:76.
15. Karen Lynn Davidson, et al., eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844, The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 51. Hereafter referred to as *JSP-H* 1.
16. *JSP-J* 1:81.

> rebuked W. W. Phelps and John Whitmer before the congregation, and "they made satisfaction the same day."[17]

From W. W. Phelps's weekly letters to his wife, Sally,[18] we know about his activities. On 11 September 1835, Phelps wrote that he was "now revising hymns for a hymn Book."[19] On 16 September 1835, Phelps noted that the Book of Commandments, the early version of the Doctrine and Covenants, had come back from the bindery: "We got some of the Commandments from Cleveland last week; I shall try to send one hundred copies to the Saints this fall by Br. Wm Tippets. He starts next week. I know there will be one hundred Saints who will have their dollar ready, when he arrives, for a Book, we put them at a dollar in order to help us a little."[20] On 27 October 1835, Phelps told Sally, "We shall begin to study Hebrew this winter, according to our present calculations."[21] Also, Phelps was not satisfied with using the bindery in Cleveland and noted: "We are also establishing a bindery to bind our own books."[22] By 14 November 1835, the Hebrew "school" had already started:

> The school has commenced under the charge of President Sidney Rigdon as teacher. I shall not be able to go much, if any; President Cowdery has gone to New York to purchase tools for a book bindery and to secure some Hebrew books so that we may study Hebrew this winter. My time and that of President John Witmer [*sic*] is all taken up in the printing office. We have, when all are in the office, three apprentices and four journeymen, and we shall have to employ more men, as our work is so far behind. We have 18 numbers of the old 'Star' [*sic*] (Evening and Morning Star) to print yet, and the "Messenger and Advocate" has been and is yet five or six weeks behind its time; and the hymn book is not likely to progress as fast as I wish, but we are all kept busy and

17. *JSP-J* 1:86.
18. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 16 September 1835, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 565.
19. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 11 September 1835, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 563.
20. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 16 September 1835, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 565–66.
21. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 27 October 1835, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 567.
22. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 27 October 1835, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 567.

> have faith that the Lord will eventually bring about all things for our own good and his name's glory.[23]

On 5 January 1836, Phelps wrote to Sally: "The Hebrew school has commenced in one of the attic school rooms in the Lord's House."[24] This frustrated Phelps a bit: "I want to study Hebrew, and I have not as yet been able to begin."[25] Joseph Smith was studying Hebrew, but apparently the printing office kept Phelps so busy that he found he had to take "time when others sleep to write" on other projects.[26]

At thirty-four written pages, the Grammar and Alphabet is almost twice as long as the longest known single-day production by Joseph Smith in this time period, and it required multiple scribes.[27] It is also over eight times longer than the longest attested single-day production of W. W. Phelps as a scribe for Joseph Smith.[28] The Grammar and Alphabet is the product of multiple days of work.

There was no time in late 1835 or early 1836 when it can be demonstrated that Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps could have worked together on the Grammar and Alphabet. Those who maintain that Joseph Smith dictated the Grammar and Alphabet to W. W. Phelps must demonstrate a credible time in which this could have been accomplished.

Possession and use of the Grammar and Alphabet

The Grammar and Alphabet was evidently being kept by W. W. Phelps. On 9 November 1843, Joseph Smith asked Phelps to ghost-write a letter to James Arlington Bennet. In his journal, Joseph said that he

23. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 14 November 1835, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 568. The "[*sic*]"s are in the edition.
24. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 5 January 1836, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 571.
25. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 5 January 1836, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 571–72.
26. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 16 September 1835, in Van Orden, "Writing to Zion," 565.
27. John Gee, "Fantasy and Reality in the Translation of the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 138–39, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/fantasy-and-reality-in-the-translation-of-the-book-of-abraham.
28. John Gee, "Prolegomena to a Study of the Egyptian Alphabet Documents in the Joseph Smith Papers," *Interpreter : A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 81, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/prolegomena-to-a-study-of-the-egyptian-alphabet-documents-in-the-joseph-smith-papers.

"gave instruction to have it [a letter from James Arlington Bennet] answerd" by W. W. Phelps, in Joseph's name.[29] Phelps spent three or four days working on the draft. On the morning of 13 November 1843, "Phelps read [the] letter to Jas A Bennet. & [Joseph Smith] made some correcti[o]ns."[30] It is clear from the journal that Joseph Smith considered the letter to have been the work of W. W. Phelps, even if he was acting as a ghost-writer. Phelps included a quotation of something that Phelps said was Egyptian, which seems to have left Joseph Smith with some sort of question and so in the afternoon Joseph "called again & enqui[re]d for the Egypti[a]n grammar."[31] This indicates that the Egyptian grammar, such as it was, was not in Joseph Smith's possession.

Two days later, Joseph Smith "suggested the idea of preparing a grammar of the Egyptian language."[32] If Joseph had thought that Phelps's existing Grammar and Alphabet was adequate, he would not have suggested preparing another grammar. Nor can we suppose that the Grammar and Alphabet was prepared in response to Joseph Smith's suggestion because Warren Parrish had apostatized and left the Church in 1837. Thus, he would not have been available to add notations to the volume.

Counterarguments

There is only one piece of evidence that has been brought forward to argue that Joseph Smith was involved in the Grammar and Alphabet. In the Manuscript History of the Church B-1, the following is written in the handwriting of Willard Richards (in the voice of Joseph Smith), forming a separate paragraph after an entry for 19 July 1835:

> The remainder of this month, I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arrangeing a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients.[33]

29. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844, The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), 127. Hereafter referred to as *JSP-J* 3.
30. *JSP-J* 3:128.
31. *JSP-J* 3:128.
32. *JSP-J* 3:130.
33. History, 1838–1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838], p. 597, The Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/51.

It is not necessarily clear that this is a reference to the Grammar and Alphabet, though many have taken it to be so.

Willard Richards began working on the Manuscript History of the Church in December 1842. At that point fifty-nine pages had been written by James Mulholland, until his death in November 1839. The next sixteen pages were written by Robert B. Thompson, before his death in August 1841. W. W. Phelps then contributed the next seventy-seven pages before November 1841.

> When Richards assumed responsibility for the project, he continued the narrative, often relying on material that was neither written nor dictated by JS. Apparently at JS's behest, he and his colleagues and successors chose to maintain the established first-person, chronological narrative format, as if JS were the author throughout.[34]

"According to Brigham Young, JS read and revised only forty-two pages of text before his death."[35] So Joseph Smith did not write, dictate, revise, or even read this passage written by Willard Richards before his death. The passage is therefore a late, at best second-hand reminiscence, and does not take precedence over contemporary, first-hand evidence.

One of the indications that the Manuscript History is not a first-hand account is that in Joseph Smith's contemporary journal, dated 1 October 1835, the document title *Egyptian Alphabet* is exactly given. This title is also found on two of the three documents produced on that date, and it appears to have been in the torn portion of the third document. The handwritings on the Egyptian Alphabet documents match the individuals who were said to be working on them. In the Manuscript History, the documents are described, not named: "an alphabet to the Book of Abraham" and "a grammar of the Egyptian language."[36] These descriptions are not even particularly accurate, as "an alphabet to the Book of Abraham" does not refer to any known document. The descriptions are neither contemporary nor first-hand; they were written six years later. Neither of these two descriptions, even if accurate, could refer to the Grammar and Alphabet, which

34. "Introduction to History, 1838–1856 (Manuscript History of the Church)," The Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-history-1838-1856-manuscript-history-of-the-church.
35. "Introduction to History, 1838–1856 (Manuscript History of the Church)."
36. History, 1838–1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838], 597.

had not yet been created in July 1835. Likewise, when Joseph Smith mentioned in his journal that he consulted an "Egyptian grammar" in November 1843, he offered a general description, not an exact title, perhaps indicating that he was not especially familiar with the work Phelps was using. This later description does not match the timing nor the titles of the documents, which is in keeping with a later second-hand reminiscence. In evaluating the evidentiary value of this source, the contemporary documentation takes precedence.

Those who wish to assert that Joseph Smith authored the Grammar and Alphabet need to make a better argument than has yet been offered that such is the case. Contemporary evidence is preferable to later evidence, and first-hand evidence is preferable to second- or third-hand evidence. The contemporary records indicate that W. W. Phelps is the author of the Grammar and Alphabet, and thus the later third-hand account in the Manuscript History, as it has been sometimes understood, is in error.

Motive

W. W. Phelps had at least two motives for producing the Grammar and Alphabet. The first is a 22 September 1835 revelation to Joseph Smith about Phelps, which stated:

> Behold, he shall have understanding of all sciences and languages, and with his brother <Oliver> shall write and arrange many books for the good of the church, that the youth may grow up in wisdom.[37]

The second is that W. W. Phelps had already sent some of his speculations on language to his wife Sally in a letter dated 26 May 1835,[38] before Joseph had ever seen the papyrus.

Summary

Thus, contemporary sources indicate that the Grammar and Alphabet was in W. W. Phelps's handwriting and possession, and that he had been engaged in a project related to language before Joseph Smith acquired the papyri. All sides agree that the Grammar and Alphabet

37. Blessing for William W. Phelps, 22 September 1835, *JSP-D* 4:435–36.
38. "William Wines Phelps letter to Sally Phelps," 26 May 1835, William Wines Phelps papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/SCMisc/id/54666/.

was written after the Egyptian Alphabet documents. According to Joseph Smith's journal, the Egyptian Alphabet documents were written on 1 October 1835. After that time, during one of the best documented periods of Joseph Smith's and W. W. Phelps's lives, they were not working together but each on their own projects. The most reasonable conclusion is that the Grammar and Alphabet is solely the work of W. W. Phelps. This explains why Joseph Smith was unfamiliar with it in 1843 and suggested that it be replaced.

The Disconnects in the Theory

Some people (many outside the Church and a few inside the Church) have theorized that Joseph Smith wrote the Grammar and Alphabet and then used it to translate the Book of Abraham. This theory is untenable in several ways. In particular, there have always been four huge disconnects in the theory that Joseph Smith used the Grammar and Alphabet to translate the Book of Abraham.

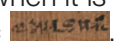
Script

First, the Egyptian characters in the margins of the Grammar and Alphabet and in the Egyptian Alphabet documents were taken from Joseph Smith Papyrus I. The Egyptian characters in the Book of Abraham manuscripts are from Joseph Smith Papyrus XI. While these two papyri originally joined, the difference cannot be minimized. The characters on Joseph Smith Papyrus I are in the hieroglyphic script, but the characters on Joseph Smith Papyrus XI are in the hieratic script. These scripts are not the same. It would be similar to writing a dictionary of Chinese characters and then using it to translate something in Japanese; one script is based on the other, but they are not identical.

It is commonly thought, even among Egyptologists who do not specialize in the subject, that hieroglyphs and hieratic have one-to-one equivalents, as though they were simply different fonts. As noted almost a century ago, while hieratic and hieroglyphics may have started out in the Old Kingdom with "each hieratic sign [having] its own proper hieroglyphic counterpart," that was no longer true by the Middle Kingdom, and by the time of the New Kingdom "it is clear that, though there is much mutual interaction between this [hieratic] and the contemporary hieroglyphic, nevertheless the two modes of writing are essentially distinct, follow their own traditions, and are not immediately

translatable the one into the other."[39] Georg Möller cataloged 618 *hieratic* signs from the Ptolemaic period,[40] while Christian Leitz asserts that there are just under 1,200 *hieroglyphic* signs.[41] A one-to-one correspondence is simply impossible, especially at the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri, when there were characters in hieratic that do not exist in hieroglyphs, as well as characters in hieroglyphs that do not exist in hieratic.

Some of these are found in the Joseph Smith Papyri. For example, the glyph  from Joseph Smith Papyrus I has no hieratic equivalent.[42] Likewise, the hieratic sign  from Joseph Smith Papyrus XI has no hieroglyphic equivalent. Furthermore, the signs , , and  from Joseph Smith Papyrus XI are not hieratic, but demotic, an indication that the ancient scribe was more comfortable writing demotic.

The hieratic and hieroglyphic versions of signs do not necessarily even look similar to each other. While this hieroglyph from Joseph Smith Papyrus I  might be recognizable in its hieratic form in Joseph Smith Papyrus XI , this sign from Joseph Smith Papyrus I  would not be recognizable from its hieratic equivalent on Joseph Smith Papyrus XI . Granted, the hieratic corresponds to the glyph  (G29), but not to the glyph  (G53A) that is on Joseph Smith Papyrus I, but there is no hieratic version of that glyph. This word in hieroglyphs from Joseph Smith Papyrus I  does not look like the same word in hieratic from Joseph Smith Papyrus XI . Likewise, this name in hieroglyphs on Joseph Smith Papyrus I  does not look remotely the same when it is written on the adjoining Joseph Smith Papyrus XI in hieratic . Equipped with a sign list based on the hieroglyphs from Joseph Smith Papyrus I would provide little help in deciphering the hieratic on Joseph Smith Papyrus XI, but that is exactly what is required by the theory that Joseph Smith used the Grammar and Alphabet to translate the Book of Abraham from the so-called Book of Breathings.

39. Alan H. Gardiner, "The Transcription of New Kingdom Hieratic," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 15 (1929): 48, doi.org/10.1177/030751332901500106.
40. Georg Möller, *Hieratische Paläographie*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1936).
41. Christian Leitz, *Quellentexte zur ägyptischen Religion I: Die Tempelinschriften der griechisch-römischen Zeit* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2004), 10.
42. To see larger versions of the glyph images in this paper, see the online article: John Gee, "Observations on W. W. Phelps's Grammar and Alphabet," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 70 (2027): 205–30, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/observations-on-w-w-phelpss-grammar-and-alphabet.

Direction of writing

Secondly, the characters in the Grammar and Alphabet are taken from the papyrus from left to right, indicating that the author of the Grammar and Alphabet read them from left to right. Egyptian papyri can be written either in vertical columns or horizontal lines, but they are almost always written and read from right to left.[43] Joseph Smith Papyrus I is written in columns, but sometimes within a column there are two glyphs which should be read starting with the character on the right, followed by the one on the left. When these characters were copied into the Grammar and Alphabet, the glyph on the left was copied first and the glyph on the right was copied on a lower line, again indicating that whoever copied the characters read them from left to right. The Egyptian Alphabet documents are similar, as the columns in Joseph Smith Papyrus I are numbered from left to right, indicating that they were also read left to right. The characters in the Book of Abraham manuscripts are taken generally from right to left (although whoever wrote them in the margin sometimes jumped around, rather than taking them strictly in order).

Some might think that the orientation of the glyphs and symbols can mark a chronological distinction in the translation of the Book of Abraham As Joseph Smith began studying Hebrew, a language that is read from right to left, in November 1835, supposedly the switch between copying from left to right to copying from right to left would occur after Joseph Smith started studying Hebrew. There are problems with this proposal. The Book of Abraham manuscripts copy characters from right to left. The Book of Abraham manuscript in W. W. Phelps's handwriting was created in July 1835. The Book of Abraham manuscript in Frederick G. Williams's handwriting was created the first week of October 1835. Joseph Smith was engaged in translating the Book of Abraham with Warren Parrish in November 1835, according to the following timeline:

- 17 November: "exhibited . . . ancient records."[44]
- 19 November: "translating the Egyptian records."[45]
- 20 November: "we spent the day in translating." Then, "At

43. There are exceptions for retrograde documents, which usually date a millennium before the Joseph Smith Papyri. Since the Joseph Smith Papyri follow the rule rather than the exception, we will not consider the exceptions.
44. *JSP-J* 1:105.
45. *JSP-J* 1:107.

> Evening, President Cowdery returned from New York, bringing with him a quantity of Hebrew book's for the benefit of the school, he presented me with a Hebrew bible, lexicon & Grammar."[46]
> - 21 November: "spent the day in examining my books and studying <the> ~~my~~ Hebrew alphabet."[47]
> - 23 November: "studying, the Hebrew <language>."[48]
> - 24 November: "we translated some of the Egyptian, records."[49]
> - 25 November: "spent the day in Translating."[50]
> - 26 November: "we spent the day in transcribing Egyptian characters from the papyrus."[51]
> - 27 November: "spent the day in reading Hebrew at home."[52]
> - 28 November: "I am conciderably recovered from my cold, & I think I shall be able in a few days to translate again."[53]

After that time, the only references to language are studying Hebrew. Joseph Smith did most of his Book of Abraham translations before studying any Hebrew, and the manuscripts of the Book of Abraham already use characters from right to left, before Joseph Smith began his Hebrew study. Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew, therefore, cannot be the cause of the switch in directions of copying characters from left to right to right to left since all of the Book of Abraham manuscripts with characters copied right to left predate his study of Hebrew.

Textual correspondences

Thirdly, the characters on the Book of Abraham manuscripts are placed at the beginning of paragraphs. If they correspond, they correspond to entire paragraphs. The characters in the Grammar and Alphabet and on the Egyptian Alphabet documents correspond to phrases or words, not paragraphs, as discussed below.

46. *JSP-J* 1:107.
47. *JSP-J* 1:107.
48. *JSP-J* 1:109.
49. *JSP-J* 1:109.
50. *JSP-J* 1:110.
51. *JSP-J* 1:110–11.
52. *JSP-J* 1:111.
53. *JSP-J* 1:112.

Terminology

Although the Egyptian Alphabet documents are similar to the Grammar and Alphabet, there are some distinct differences. The ways that the terms *degree* and *part* are used in the two sets of documents differs. In the Egyptian Alphabet documents, both terms are used to refer to locations on the papyrus; the term *degree* refers to what we would call a *fragment*, and the term *part* refers to what we would call a *column*.[54]

In the Grammar and Alphabet, *degree* is taken as a feature of grammar. While the Grammar and Alphabet is not clearly organized or articulated, the following seems to be what its author understands by the term *degree*: A sample Egyptian "character alone has 5 parts of speech."[55] The "five connecting parts of speech" might be, for example, "verbs, particip=les, prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs."[56] Thus, that particular "character is in the fifth degree."[57] "In Translati{on\ ng} this character, the subject must be continued until there are as many of these connecting parts of speech used as there are connections or connecting parts found in the character."[58] "By inserting a straight mark over it [the character] . . . it increases its signification five degrees."[59] In other words, "whenever the character is found with one horizontal line" then "the subject must be continued until ~~twice~~ five times the numbr of connecting parts of speech are used; or, the full sense of the writer is not conveyed."[60] Thus, a *degree* is the number of parts of speech that a character can take, not its column number on the papyrus.

In the Book of Abraham manuscripts, the terms *degree* and *part* do not refer to the location of the characters. The only reference found there is to "the fifth degree of the ~~first~~ second part."[61] Perhaps *part* refers to the fragment here, but since the characters come from the first line of the fragment, it is not clear what *degree* refers to. These, however, come from the later manuscripts, while the earliest manuscript, in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps, does not have any such notation.[62]

54. Gee, "Prolegomena to a Study of the Egyptian Alphabet Documents in the Joseph Smith Papers," 90–91.
55. *JSP-R* 4:116.
56. *JSP-R* 4:116.
57. *JSP-R* 4:116.
58. *JSP-R* 4:116.
59. *JSP-R* 4:116.
60. *JSP-R* 4:116.
61. *JSP-R* 4:194, 204.
62. *JSP-R* 4:218.

Table 2 provides a summarization of these observations.

Whatever is being done in the Grammar and Alphabet it is neither the same as in the Egyptian Alphabet documents, nor in the Book of Abraham manuscripts. The three approaches are incompatible with each other. The vocabulary usage seems to indicate that the authors of the various groups of documents had very different things in mind when they wrote them.

Definition Length

Some have ridiculed the long definitions that Phelps gives in the Grammar and Alphabet. They have probably never looked at the earliest English dictionary of Egyptian. Written by Samuel Sharpe of the British Museum and published in 1837—and thus nearly contemporary with Phelps's unpublished work—the earliest dictionary contains 1,050 entries in 140 pages. One of the entries, , stretches over four pages,[63] followed by one () covering three pages.[64] Although Phelps is not as verbose as Sharpe, both are following the patterns of their time. One should note that just because Sharpe was taking full advantage of Champollion's decipherment, this did not prevent Sharpe from asserting things that current Egyptologists would find absurd. For example, in his first definition, Sharpe derives "Amun-Ra, from *amoni* to govern, and *rē* the sun."[65] Current Egyptology would reject the first part of his etymology.

Egyptian and Other Languages

While the transcriptions in the Grammar and Alphabet have typically been taken to be what W. W. Phelps thought was Egyptian, they have also been typically dismissed as not being Egyptian, usually by individuals who know no Egyptian themselves. The actual language may or may not be Egyptian. Consider the following apparently related entries, all of which are defined as meaning "another kingdom," and follow a definition meaning something like "the residence for men":[66]

> [Second part 5th Degree]  Kah tu=ain: Another kingdom governed by different laws, composed of subjects who

63. Samuel Sharpe, *Rudiments of a Vocabulary of Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (London: Edward Moxon, 1837), 98–101.
64. Sharpe, *Rudiments of a Vocabulary of Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, 101–3.
65. Sharpe, *Rudiments of a Vocabulary of Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, 23.
66. *JSP-R* 4:160.

Table 2. A summarization of available evidence concerning the documents.

	Book of Abraham manuscripts	Egyptian Alphabet documents	Grammar and Alphabet
Source of characters	P. Joseph Smith XI	P. Joseph Smith I	P. Joseph Smith I
Type of characters	Hieratic	Hieroglyphs	Hieroglyphs
Direction characters read	Right to left	Left to right	Left to right
Pairing of characters with English text	Paragraphs	Words or phrases	Words or phrases
Meaning of "degree"		Fragment	Parts of speech
Meaning of "part"	Fragment?	Column	

re=ceive their place at a future period, and governed by those who are under the di-rections of another; [*lighter ink*] a kingdom whose subject differ one from another ^in glory; ~~who come out into the pres~~ behold not the face of God[67]

[Second part 4th Degree]  Ka^{h}tu ain trieth: an other kingdom. govrn=eed by different laws. a second king. or governed by another, or second person not having been {p\e} xalted.[68]

[Second part of 3rd Degree]  De=eh, another kingdom; ~~the heart of all kig~~ over which Dah=Hah dees, or the king of Hell, ~~cannot~~ will not be permitted to exercise power at some fixed period.[69]

[Second part 2nd Degree]  Hah dees= Another kingdom of wickedness, ~~not so extensive in duration~~, ~~which government is under another, which is~~ under the government of one who is an enemy to God over which he has not so much power as the f{r\i}<r>st, being less extensive in its duration.[70]

[Second part of the Alphabet 1st Degree]  Dah tu Hah

67. *JSP-R* 4:160.
68. *JSP-R* 4:168.
69. *JSP-R* 4:172.
70. *JSP-R* 4:176 (transcription corrected).

> dees: ~~Hell~~ another kingdom, the least kingdom, a kingdom without glory, the whole kingdom and domin of darkness, with all its degrees and parts. governed by ~~him~~ ~~Do<r>~~ ~~agrees<s>~~ him who is an enemy to {G}od.[71]

All of the entries have been reworked, as evident from the cross-outs, additions, and rewrites. This indicates that the document is a draft, not a finished product.

Each of these definitions is preceded by a character, but none of the characters are the same. The definitions are united by the designation "another kingdom," which follows definitions for the kingdom of the earth. The fact that the characters are not the same indicates that the characters are secondary to the definition.

The term "Hah dees" is Greek *hadēs* (ᾅδης), which is loaned into English as *Hades*. Although later Coptic had numerous Greek loanwords, this particular word does not seem to have been borrowed into Coptic. Rather the term *amnte* was used.[72]

The term "De=eh" seems to be for Old Coptic *tē* (ⲧⲏ) "underworld."[73] The Old Coptic term is attested in a third century AD papyrus in the phrase *eouōtf ousire pero ntē* "hail, Osiris, king of the netherworld."[74] The Coptic term derives from earlier Egyptian *dwꜣt* or *dꜣt* "netherworld."[75] Egyptological transcriptions of this word have changed over the years: *man eōou* (1841),[76] *tiáû* (1851),[77] *ṭuaut*

71. *JSP-R* 4:180 (transcription corrected).
72. Walter E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 8.
73. Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 392.
74. PGM IV 11 (= P. Bibl. Nat. suppl. gr. 574 2/8) in *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, Karl Preisendanz (Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1928–31), 1:66; Adolf Erman, "Die ägyptischen Beschwörungen des großen Pariser Zauberpapyrus," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptischen Sprache und Altertumskunde* 21 (1883): 94; Francis Ll. Griffith, "The Old Coptic magical texts of Paris," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptischen Sprache und Altertumskunde* 38 (1900): 86–87.
75. Jaroslav Černý, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 178; Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1962), 310.
76. Jean-François Champollion, *Dictionnaire égyptien* (Paris: Didot frères, 1841), 13.
77. Henricus Brugsch, *Saï an Sinsin sive Liber Metempsychosis veterum Aegyptiorum* (Berlin: R. Gaertner, 1851), 15, 37.

(1882),[78] *ṭuat* (1898),[79] *ṭua-t* (1920),[80] *dȝ.t* (1926),[81] *dwȝt* (1927).[82] "Dah tu" may be a transcription of an earlier form of the same word. This means that we have at least one and perhaps two forms of an authentic Egyptian word, with its appropriate definition in Phelps's Grammar and Alphabet. Because the Egyptian language was attested for over four thousand years, undergoing many changes in grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and pronunciation, it would be useful to know which time period of Egyptian language is being represented in the Grammar and Alphabet. It appears that multiple stages are used, although the pronunciation seems to be close to that of the time period of the Joseph Smith Papyri.

Another Egyptian term that appears in this series of entries is "Kah tu" or "Ka^{h}tu," both of which are defined as "another kingdom." Coptic has two forms of the word *kah*. The masculine form means "earth, land, country"[83] and comes from earlier *qȝḥ* meaning "earth, soil."[84] The feminine form means "district, province"[85] and comes from earlier *qᶜḥt,* also meaning "district, province."[86] Etymologically, these are two different words but end up collapsing in pronunciation. Alternatively, the terms could be *ke* / *kē* / *kai* / *kou* "another,"[87] and *to* / *toou* "land, earth."[88] The transliteration system that was used in Kirtland often used an *h* after a vowel to indicate a lengthened vowel or a closed syllable, as well as consonantal *h*. This creates a problem with Egyptian, which had four phonemic *h*s — h, ḥ, ḫ, and ẖ (five in Demotic: h, ḥ, ḫ, ẖ, and h̰) — leaving many different possibilities in dealing with a transcribed *h*.

The appearance of actual Egyptian in Phelps's work might make

78. Heinrich Brugsch, *Hieroglyphisch-demotisches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1882), 7:1359.
79. E. A. Wallis Budge, *A Vocabulary in Hieroglyphic to the Theban Recension of the Book of the Dead* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1898), 361.
80. E. A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (London: John Murray, 1920), 2:871–72.
81. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der aegyptischen Sprache* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1926), 5:415–16.
82. Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1927), 487 (with an explanation of the reading), 602.
83. Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 131.
84. Černý, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, 67.
85. Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 131.
86. Černý, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, 67.
87. Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 90–92.
88. Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 396.

some think that this argues for Joseph Smith's involvement. But that is not necessarily so. Joseph Smith blessed Phelps on 22 September 1835 to "have understanding of all sciences and languages."[89] If one believes that Joseph Smith received revelation and that revelation continues in the Church today, there is no reason that W. W. Phelps and others could not receive revelation as well.

We have seen in Phelps's Grammar and Alphabet that some transliterations are definitely not Egyptian, but some of them seem to be. We have also seen that matching of characters and definitions is not consistent across the volume. This makes it difficult to argue that a coherent system is present in the document.

Language Structure

Because there are those who believe that the Grammar and Alphabet was the key for turning the scroll of Horos (P. Joseph Smith I+XI+X) into the first chapter of the Book of Abraham, let us compare the parts of speech used in the three texts; see table 3.

A number of features stand out in table 3. First, Phelps's Grammar and Alphabet has significantly more nouns than the comparative texts, about double or triple the amount. On the other hand, prepositions, pronouns, and verbs are considerably underrepresented in the Grammar and Alphabet. This is a characteristic that it shares with Sharpe's slightly later Egyptian dictionary.

Second, both the Book of Abraham and the text on the first column

89. Blessing for William W. Phelps, 22 September 1835, *JSP-D* 4:435–36.

Table 3. Comparison of the parts of speech.

	Grammar and Alphabet	P. JS I+IX column 1	Book of Abraham 1
nouns	161 (73%)	43 (38%)	343 (25%)
particles	8 (4%)	11 (10%)	284 (21%)
prepositions	7 (3%)	20 (18%)	279 (20%)
verbs	11 (5%)	13 (12%)	210 (15%)
pronouns	4 (2%)	18 (16%)	138 (10%)
adjectives	12 (5%)	5 (4%)	54 (4%)
adverbs	10 (5%)	2 (2%)	52 (4%)
numerals	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (0%)
undetermined	7 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

of Joseph Smith Papyrus XI, which are actual texts intended to convey meaning, share somewhat similar proportions of the various parts of speech, which is not true for the Grammar and Alphabet.

Third, most of the emphasis in the Grammar and Alphabet is on one verb, "to see," and one preposition, "under," each of which appears only once in the first chapter of the Book of Abraham. Proponents of the theory that Joseph Smith used the Grammar and Alphabet to produce the Book of Abraham may be hard-pressed to explain where the other 278 prepositions and 209 verbs in the first chapter of the Book of Abraham come from.

Syntactic Analysis

In two places in the Grammar and Alphabet, Phelps provides examples of simple sentences in what he seems to have thought was Egyptian which provide insight into his attempt to understand Egyptian. While it would be preferrable to have more examples to work with, Phelps gave us only two:

> Zipzi Iata veh. I saw five women[90]
>
> Iota tou es Zip zi The land which was discovered under water by a woman[91]

The constituent parts of these sentences have definitions: "Zipzi" is defined as "a woman married or unmarried."[92] "Iota" is defined as "To see."[93] "Iata" is defined as "me myself."[94] This is a pun on the similar sounds in English of *eye* and *I*. "Veh" is defined as "Five" in the Egyptian Counting document,[95] which indicates that the Egyptian Counting document predates the Grammar and Alphabet. "Toues" is defined as "under the Sun; under heaven; downward." This gives us so-called literal translations of:

> Woman I/saw five.
>
> Saw under woman

What we do not find is a consistent syntax. In one case the verb comes first, in the other, it comes second. In one case the subject

90. *JSP-R 4*:168.
91. *JSP-R 4*:150.
92. *JSP-R 4*:150.
93. *JSP-R 4*:146.
94. *JSP-R 4*:134.
95. *JSP-R 4*:96.

comes second, and in the other it comes at the end. The adjective is separated from the noun it modifies by the verb. In other words, the syntax is seen to resemble Latin. Classical Latin prose normally places the subject first, the object second, and the verb at the end. Latin can freely vary the word order for various stylistic, poetic and rhetorical reasons. This was less frequent until Jerome's translation of the Vulgate, wherein he mostly kept the word order from the Greek New Testament, and the influence of the Vulgate made later Latin much more flexible in terms of word order. Thus, the fact that later Latin can have any word order is often misunderstood by students (and sometimes their teachers), wrongly concluding that Latin has no normal word order. This is what we see in Phelps's attempt at structuring sentences.

Egyptian, on the other hand, has a rather rigid syntax. Either the verb comes first with the subject second, or the subject comes first, followed by the verb. Adjectives immediately follow the noun they modify, although numbers can sometimes precede the noun they modify. The syntax of sample sentences in the Grammar and Alphabet is not Egyptian.

Ideally, we would have more than two examples to analyze the syntax, but the two that we have are sufficient to show that the syntax is neither Egyptian nor English. Latin becomes the next most likely language to examine. In 1837, even the Kirtland High School had a classical department where H. M. Haws taught Latin and Greek.[96] The fact that the syntax appears to follow Latin is another potential indication that the Grammar and Alphabet is the work of W. W. Phelps, because Phelps had a decent education (including Latin), whereas Joseph Smith had not.

On the Egyptian Counting Document

The Egyptian Counting document has received little commentary, by comparison. However, some things are worth noting.

The characters on the Egyptian Counting document have a demonstrable origin. Contrary to the claim that "it is unknown where the characters originated,"[97] their origin is not that mysterious. The characters in the Egyptian Counting document are not from any of the papyri, but

96. Oliver Cowdery, "Our Village," *Messenger and Advocate* 3, no.4 (January 1837): 444.
97. *JSP-R* 4:95.

Table 4. Numerals appearing in the Egyptian Counting document.

Numeral	Character	Numeral	Character
1		6	
2		7	
3		8	
4		9	
5		10	

are modified versions of the Arabic numerals used in English. This can be seen in table 4.

The numerals for 4, 5, 7, and 8 are virtually identical; the numerals for 1, 9, and 10 are reversed; and the numerals for 2, 3, and 6 are more distant from the English equivalents. Thus, they cannot be described as an attempt to understand the papyri as they existed, but rather they represent a wholly theoretical exercise based on English. The system of counting described in the document actually resembles the way of counting in Chinese. The counting document seems to be read from right to left, as when the character for 1 is on the left of the character for 10 (), which is given the translation of "10 & 1."[98] The translation "twice ten and one are 21" is given with the characters for 2 10 1, written from right to left . This resembles the Chinese way of writing the same number (二十一), although the Chinese is read left to right.

There is further evidence that Egyptian Counting was stored with the copy of Egyptian Alphabet in W. W. Phelps's handwriting:

> Pinholes in the same location on the Egyptian Counting document indicate that document was attached to and stored with this one [the Egyptian Alphabet document in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps = CHL ms. 1295 fd. 3].[99]

This arguably puts the document in Phelps's possession.

98. *JSP-R* 4:96.
99. *JSP-R* 4:85, 95.

Conclusions

Attempts to assign the authorship of the Grammar and Alphabet to Joseph Smith are based on a single late reminiscence that Joseph Smith did not dictate, approve, nor even apparently read. The reminiscence shows an imprecision of language that marks it as late and inaccurate. The contemporary documents are much more precise in language.

The Grammar and Alphabet is in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps There is no time when Joseph Smith could have dictated it to him. It was in Phelps's possession, not Joseph Smith's. The Grammar and Alphabet features an understanding of language based on Latin, which would have been familiar to Phelps, but not to Joseph Smith. The Book of Abraham documents read the characters from right to left, but the work known to be Phelps's is generally from left to right. Assigning the Grammar and Alphabet to Joseph Smith's creation is insupportable.

Since the Grammar and Alphabet and the Egyptian Counting document neither come from the mind of Joseph Smith, nor are precursors to the Book of Abraham, we are free to examine them as products of their author, W. W. Phelps. What we find is Phelps's speculation about Egyptian language based on languages with which he was familiar (and interestingly, some of these were not languages that Joseph Smith knew), mainly English and Latin. Intriguingly, though, some real Egyptian and Greek appears in the documents with correct vocalization and definitions. While Latter-day Saints would not have a problem explaining how Phelps might get some real revelation—he was promised such—it is harder to explain what the Egyptian is doing there without revelation.



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