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Scriptures through the Jeweler's Lens

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SCRIPTURES THROUGH THE JEWELER'S LENS

Mark J. Johnson

Review of Terryl Givens with Brian Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). 285 pages. \$34.95 (hardback).

Abstract: *Among the many revelatory works of Joseph Smith, members and scholars alike seem to give lesser attention to what is found in the Pearl of Great Price. In The Pearl of Greatest Price, Terryl Givens and Brian Hauglid attempt to provide some of the attention that has been lacking. The result is a book that, while spotty in places, provides a good resource that should receive wide exposure in academic circles. Believing members, on the other hand, may find the book lacking or downright questionable because of the secular approach it takes to dealing with scripture understood to have a divine provenance.*

In *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture*, Terryl Givens takes the reader on a deep dive to rediscover the Pearl of Great Price. His insights reveal a beautiful, important, and complex book of scripture that can be as challenging as it is dazzling. In this book, Givens gives readers a sweeping survey of the doctrines of the restoration as reflected by the Pearl. This is done in the context of Joseph Smith's experiences in and often in contrast to his Christian-cultured environment.

Givens sees the Pearl of Great Price as Mormonism's greatest treasure and best kept secret. The book's subtitle, "Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture" is the loupe Givens gazes through in his examination of the Pearl. He is eager to show where the Pearl really shines, but he also takes note of any blemishes in the material. The notion of discussing the flaws of the scriptures might be uncomfortable to some readers, but such an approach is a useful and often necessary conversation. Such discussions can certainly shed light on and possibly discredit some claims of the critics; but more importantly, it can

illuminate our own unexamined assumptions and faulty expectations about the scriptures which we might have mistaken for fact.

Givens has noted that *The Pearl of Greatest Price* is a follow-up to his earlier book, *By the Hand of Mormon*,¹ which explored an early Latter-day Saint viewpoint that the Book of Mormon took the role of an eschatological milepost on the road of the foretold events of the Second Coming. *The Pearl of Greatest Price* can also be seen as a companion to Philip L. Barlow's *Mormons and the Bible*,² as they both examine Latter-day Saint interaction with the biblical text and explore Joseph Smith's role as prophet and seer from a secular standpoint.

This concept of coming from a "secular standpoint" cannot be glossed over. Givens is a believing member of the Church, but because he has written this book aimed at an academic audience, some Latter-day Saint readers might be confused by the tone they find in the pages of the book, especially if they read with homiletic or devotional expectations. Instead, Givens follows an academic approach of historiography to make observations about the Pearl of Great Price from a scholarly position. *The Pearl of Greatest Price* follows the academic influence of what has been called the "New Mormon History," wherein scholars examine "Mormonism" with the intent of viewing it from a larger historical and cultural perspective, rather than attempting to prove or disprove the Church's religious claims. In this writing style, Givens is presenting in the same vein as other Latter-day Saint scholars, who "consciously learned to write in a tone the secular audience could hear."³

The Pearl of Greatest Price begins with a detailed history of the Pearl of Great Price and its individual components: the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible (JST) with emphasis on Moses 1, Moses 6–7, JST Matthew 24, and a discussion of the nature and purpose of Joseph's revision of the Bible. Next is a detailed survey of the Book of Abraham, its possible means of production, and potential cultural influences on its contents. He also provides a review of the controversies associated with the Book of Abraham. The Book of Abraham is also shown to have an important role in Joseph Smith's developing doctrines of the priesthood as well as his temple theology. A third section discusses the canonized

1. Terry L. Givens, *By The Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

2. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion - Updated Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

3. Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *Faith is not Blind* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 5.

version of Joseph Smith's history, and the fourth section assesses the Articles of Faith in their historical context.

The Platform of Controversy

The foundational idea of *The Pearl of Greatest Price* is that Joseph Smith's own experiences, teachings, and revelations directly tear at the underpinnings of Christianity as it existed in antebellum America. Givens has explored this idea since 1997 in his first book, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy*.⁴ Again picking up this theme, Givens explores the Pearl of Great Price as juxtaposed primarily against 19th and 20th century Christianity. Givens frames the Pearl of Great Price as controversial because of the implications it has on the Christian concept of creed and canon. Givens explains:

It is ... in the pages of the Pearl of Great Price that we find the essential foundations of a radically new religious tradition. Here Old Testament narratives are totally recast as human ascent rather than fall, a new covenant theology is propounded that reaches back to human premortality, God's nature is redefined in ways diametrically opposed to Christian creedal formulations, Trinitarianism is undone, the possibilities of human theosis are first limned, and the template of the Zion society Smith was called to build is first laid out. (4)

Controversial stances can also be found in the Latter-day Saint rejection of other Christian traditions such as an *ex nihilo* creation; a Bible that is the sole word of God, sufficient alone for instruction; and that the heavens, along with the scriptural canon, are irrevocably closed.

Givens's thesis puts forward that Mormonism's *supposed* heretical and dangerous nature (from the viewpoint of other Christian traditions) comes not from its practices but rather by its total demystification of Christianity itself. Joseph Smith's religious innovations dwell in the realm of the literal, which had all but been abandoned by the early church fathers who defined and redefined early Christian belief with an affiliation of Hellenism, philosophy, and rhetoric.

An example explored by Givens can be found in regard to the nature of God. He cites typical Christian thought that God cannot be "literally troubled or grieving for his wayward creatures ... because it would make God hostage to the whims of those creatures" (48). God

4. Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

as taught by Joseph Smith, however, is no longer the “uncreated and incomprehensible” God of the creeds, but he is the actual Father and creator of the human race, with a body, parts and passions, who weeps over the suffering of his children.

This rejection of a literal interpretation of deity and his interactions with mankind has been noted years ago by Hugh Nibley, “The two things that have ever rendered eschatology odious to the intellectuals have been 1) its literalism and 2) its supernaturalism. They can accept the supernatural-if they don’t have to take it literally; and they can be literal enough, provided one omits the supernatural.”⁵ Givens also notes this unsavory idea of accepting certain doctrines at face value, “Legions of theologians and commentators have resorted to semantics, Higher Criticism, or simple fideism to resolve the most repugnant aspects of biblical literalism” (70). This was the crime of Joseph Smith. He was visited by God, who was both tangible and corporeal. Joseph witnessed firsthand that Jesus has experienced a literal, bodily resurrection. And shockingly enough, Joseph taught that God literally speaks again from the heavens.

The Pearl of Great Price

Givens begins with an examination of the history behind the Pearl of Great Price including the formation of the individual sections of the Pearl and their being brought together by Apostle and President of the British Mission Franklin D. Richards in 1851. By this date, the number of Saints living in Great Britain was almost triple that of those living in the Salt Lake Valley. These British saints sorely needed books and materials to continue the work of proselyting and combatting the claims of the enemies of the Church. More copies of the scriptures were needed, as were hymnals and apologetic pamphlets. Issues of the Church’s UK newspaper *The Millennial Star* were also printed and sold as were copies of books such as Parley P. Pratt’s *A Voice of Warning*. Speaking of Elder Richards’s work, Givens notes, “Apparently, his assembly and printing of the Pearl of Great Price was, in his estimation, just one more project among myriad works he was ushering into print, not deserving of any particular notice in the larger field of his endeavors” (6).

Just as the initial compilation was released in 1851 with virtually no fanfare, so too was the canonization of the Pearl proper. This new book of scripture appeared almost as an afterthought to the 1880 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. The canonization wouldn’t have been

5. Hugh W. Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, eds. John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillum and Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 289.

a surprise to anyone of the era, as the Pearl of Great Price was very much in the public eye, having been used more and more frequently in General Conference addresses. The Pearl of Great Price quickly rose past being a theologoumenical item to becoming authoritative scripture.

The original Pearl of Great Price contained different material than the later canonized version, including Joseph's "The Prophecy on War" which was later canonized as D&C 87 as well as questions and answers regarding the Book of Revelation which later became D&C 77. The Pearl of Great Price was reworked and republished in 1878 with new content including "A Revelation on the Eternity of the Marriage Covenant" which was later brought into the fold of the D&C as section 132. Givens further notes that the "potpourri character of the volume was still evident in the 1970s, when two long-neglected revelations (one by Joseph Smith and one by his grand-nephew Joseph F. Smith) were added to the Pearl of Great Price — but only as a kind of way station on the path to canonization in the Doctrine and Covenants a few years later" (22).

The Joseph Smith Translation

The discussion of the JST begins by noting that in Joseph Smith's time, it wasn't uncommon for ecclesiastical leaders to produce their own Bible translations. Givens briefly discusses these translations, ranging from earlier efforts such as John Wesley's bible translation of 1775 to those of Joseph Smith's own time, such as the translations made by Alexander Campbell and Noah Webster.

Joseph Smith's translation project was, of course, very different than that of his contemporaries. The very existence of the JST shows the Bible was in itself inadequate as a religious foundation. Givens notes, as have other authors, that Joseph became aware of the limitations of the Bible in his early search for religious truth, which events led to his prayer in the grove. This awareness grew with the later visit by the angel Moroni, who quoted scripture "with a little variation" from that of the Bible (JS-H 1:36). Finally, Joseph was taught as he translated the Book of Mormon that many "plain and precious things" (1 Nephi 13:29) would be lost from the Biblical text.

Joseph Smith's revision of the Bible has been difficult to grasp by students of the scriptures because it has multiple manifestations. The additions by the JST differ among themselves in size, purpose, style, and method of production. Some of the large narrative additions read like a restoration of lost material while other parts of the JST are clearly

narrative or doctrinal harmonization, and other parts strongly suggest editorial work by the prophet to improve the text.

These categories of changes cover a wide swath of territory resulting in a multiplicity of categories due to the varied nature of the final product. This results in confusion and controversy to students regarding the nature and purpose of the JST. Difficulties in understanding arise if students insist on casting all the JST changes into one category.

Thomas A. Wayment also notes a significant factor for the confusion regarding the nature of the JST, in that it is disproportionately represented in the Latter-day Saint versions of the scriptures. The earliest portions of the JST became canonized scripture in the form of the Book of Moses, which were extracted from the first eight chapters of the translation of Genesis as well as the text of JST Matthew 24 (Joseph Smith – Matthew). Other selections of the JST are published in an Appendix of the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Version of the Bible. Some selections are included in the footnotes of the Bible, and many changes aren't included at all. Wayment summarizes the problem:

[The uneven presentation of the JST] combines to create a rather mixed message about the text. Because of the way that it is presented to us in print, [the JST] is something that can be used selectively, disregarded in some cases, and highlighted in others. It is also a lot like a footnote, which includes references to maps, Topical Guide entries, and language study helps. I think it would be difficult for the Latter-day Saint reader to avoid making the conclusion that the Joseph Smith Translation was similar in most ways to the other footnotes.⁶

Further, Givens notes that the JST gets “little more than passing notice in LDS curriculum” (32). In spite of modern uncertainty about the JST and its place in doctrinal matters, Givens describes the biblical revisions as Joseph Smith’s “most theologically significant endeavor” (34), and to his credit, he discusses the JST with less of an emphasis on production and more focus on theological and doctrinal matters.

Givens examines the Book of Moses and the revision of Matthew 24 under the larger umbrella of the JST as a whole. This allows him to explore themes shared with the other corrections made by the Prophet. Turning to some of the non-canonized portions of the JST, he notes that numerous

6. Thomas A. Wayment, “10 questions with Thomas Wayment,” interview by Kurt Manwaring, *From The Desk* (blog), January 2, 2019, <https://www.fromthedesk.org/10-questions-thomas-wayment/>.

revisions contribute to the theme of God's Everlasting Covenant. These adjustments reveal that the covenant was established with the patriarchs before the time of Moses, reaching all the way back to Adam and Eve. The children of Israel under Moses's stewardship also were to enlist in the covenant, but according to the JST, their sins in the wilderness made them heirs of an "impoverished" version of the everlasting covenant (76) without the full array of salvific ordinances. Givens shows that Smith's version of biblical history demonstrates a fullness of the Everlasting Covenant which was conceived since before the time of Adam and Eve rather than it being a growing doctrinal and theological system which finally found realization in the fledgling Christian church of the New Testament.

Moses: "Caught Up to an Exceeding High Mountain"

Building on the theme of Mormonism as a flat-out rejection of Smith's contemporary Christianity, Givens highlights the theological content of the early chapters of the Book of Moses showing how the Genesis narrative was recast or restored so as to present lost doctrinal truths. God's purpose is the exaltation of his children, a premortal existence of souls, a spiritual followed by a physical creation, and Adam and Eve participating in a beneficial fall are some of the "new" doctrines which had long since disappeared from mainstream Christianity. Givens notes that the notion of a premortal existence similar to the one presented in the Book of Moses is also found in certain Jewish and Christian traditions.

Givens supplements these doctrinal restorations (particularly the plurality of worlds) with similar ideas from ancient and medieval commentators as well as from poets and theologians. This idea of multiple worlds quickly resonated with the early members of the Restored Church who saw themselves as belonging to part of a much larger heavenly society.

Givens advances through the creation in the Book of Moses to the Adam and Eve narrative, noting that these restorations also hearken back to a premortal existence with a view of the Grand Council in heaven. This serves as a backdrop for Satan's rebellion, which Givens notes, had Satan seeking to destroy the agency of man. The doctrine of agency quickly became a "concept of unprecedented significance in LDS theology" (40).

The Prophecy of Enoch

The Enoch narrative (Moses 6–7) is introduced against a backdrop of other apocryphal works such as *The Apocryphal New Testament* and the backlash that followed such publications from the larger Christian community. Givens states that "the mere retrieval of those selections that

lost out was an implicit rebuff to an arbitrarily designed — and closed — canon” (44).

Givens’s work on the ancient prophet Enoch lists a handful of ancient parallels between the Enoch of the Pearl of Great Price and the Enoch of ancient tradition and apocryphal lore. Givens confesses that he isn’t attempting to prove the Enoch material correct but merely to shine a light on the inspiration and prophetic genius of Joseph Smith.

Givens returns to the themes from his earlier book *The God Who Weeps*.⁷ He maintains that the significance of the Enoch pericope in the Book of Moses is its presentation of God as one who uniquely loves and feels. Indeed, he notes that God’s dominion and power “flow from his love and vulnerability, whose infinite power is grounded in his infinite empathy” (55).

The revelation on the prophet Enoch and his city of Zion had important implications for the upcoming work of Joseph Smith. Givens notes that the idea of Zion began as a grand spiritual ideal where healing would be provided for a sick world. Soon, however, the idea of Zion became associated with a “brick-and-mortar” city to be built for the gathering of Israel (56). Indeed, Smith’s intentions soon ambitiously included gatherings and reunions with an American Zion (which he taught was the New Jerusalem of scripture), a renewed old-world Jerusalem, and the original Zion (the city of Enoch). Joseph Smith so yearned for a gathering of the saints, that he dedicated a site for the city and began with a plat for the city’s layout. Givens correctly observes that the narrative of Enoch in the Book of Moses was the springboard to launch the Zion of the latter-days.

Joseph Smith — Matthew

After discussing the theological import of Zion, Givens transitions to the part of the Pearl of Great Price entitled “Joseph Smith–Matthew.” Givens approaches this section by asking, “Why was such special significance accorded to one New Testament chapter out of the dozens Smith reworked?” (7).

Givens sees the inclusion of JST Matthew 24 in the Pearl of Great Price as fueled by the Church’s yearning to return to their lost Zion. “Smith focused more editorial effort on Matthew 24 than on any other single chapter of the New Testament he revised. Doubtless this was in large part due to the prominence of millennialism in Smith’s surroundings as well as in his own religious thinking” (63–64). The dominance of the imminent millennium can even be seen in the early use of the Book

7. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Melrose Park, IL: Ensign Peak), 2012.

of Mormon within the Church. The early Saints perceived the Book of Mormon, not for its teachings but rather for its role in eschatological history, where it was seen as a sort of millennial fulcrum, as an instrument in the hand of the Lord leveraging the beginning of the last days.

Givens notes that the desire to build Zion in Jackson County, Missouri, was at a time when many of the surrounding Christian denominations held a strong preoccupation with millennialism. He writes, "The inclusion of Matthew 24, with its detailed accounting of the events accompanying the Second Coming, would have been both an important reaffirmation of millennialism and a comforting reassurance that 'the little season' could not last much longer" (66). Givens then insightfully returns to the example of Enoch and his city of Zion as a template and aspiration for the Saints to build their own Zion, a New Jerusalem where they settled in Missouri. This desire was soon seared into the collective consciousness of the Saints as they were expelled from the state, requiring them to put this desire into a long hiatus. Today, the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are increasingly teaching of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the building up of Zion, but the return to Jackson County proper is conspicuously absent. Givens's readers will have to carefully consider his claims that such a return to Jackson County is largely a forgotten doctrinal relic of the past (67).

The Book of Abraham

Givens lays out his approach regarding the chapters of the Book of Abraham, asking, "How were they produced, and does their unique manner of production bear on their scriptural status? What are the challenges to their standing as inspired scripture today?" (8).

Much like the Book of Moses, the Book of Abraham is a radical return to ancient eternal principles that so crassly defy the creeds of Christendom. "[Joseph Smith] was remaking Christianity from the bottom up, propounding an entirely new *ex materia* cosmology, a covenant theology that put preexisting human souls alongside heavenly parents as members of a divine family" (124). The Book of Abraham continued to elevate the innovation begun in the Book of Moses by solidifying the existence of mankind in their premortal realm and that the fall of Adam and Eve was no catastrophic setback but rather an anticipated stage in their eternal progression. This culminates, according to Givens, in the sacramental rites performed in the temple endowment, for the endowment narrative was introduced on the heels of the publication of the Book of Abraham. He clarifies by noting that

“the Book of Abraham provided the theological material that allowed Smith to reconstitute the temple in the sense in which it had been understood anciently — mapping human origins and destiny in the context of premortal covenant-making” (128).

Building on the theme of doctrinal restorations that came with the Book of Abraham, Givens notes that the Book of Abraham is closely tied to two aspects of the priesthood. This first aspect is discussed in regards to the Book of Abraham’s contribution to the growing understanding of the Patriarchal Order. Second, he discusses the role of the Book of Abraham in the priesthood and temple ban put in place during the presidency of Brigham Young.

Givens shows that the Book of Abraham was translated simultaneously with Joseph Smith’s growing understanding of the blessing power held by the biblical patriarchs. Givens continues this theme of an evolving understanding of priesthood power and this power as the engine behind the emerging theology of eternal marriage. He then filters these newly revealed doctrines through the Abrahamic covenant to show friends and family sealed together in “eternal bonds” (133).

At this point, Givens continues this line of reasoning to a supposed logical conclusion that Joseph Smith would have seen the Abrahamic blessing of seed as numerous as the sands of the sea (Genesis 15:5). This, together with Abraham’s taking an additional wife, led Joseph and other church leaders to take plural wives of their own to participate in the fullness of the Abrahamic covenant by having eternal “seed” and an endless posterity. Givens may or may not be correct in this observation, but he has to do some mind-reading of Joseph Smith to arrive at this conclusion. It is also worth noting research by Dan Bachman showing the revelation on marriage (D&C 132) was not received during the time of the Book of Abraham translation but more than a full decade earlier, as Joseph Smith was working his way through his translation of the early chapters of Genesis.⁸ This could be significant, as it would modify the importance of the Book of Abraham’s influence on Givens’s pattern of doctrinal evolution.

The reader should pay special attention to the short section on the Book of Abraham’s role in the former restriction of priesthood and temple ordinances to primarily African-Americans. It was the opinion of some Church leaders that the Book of Abraham explained the ban. The Book of Abraham notes that some souls that God made were “good,” and

8. Danel W. Bachman, “New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage,” *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978): 25.

consequently, these souls were to be made “rulers.” It isn’t a big step to see that those on Earth who were not rulers must not have been “good” in the premortal realm. This, in addition to theories regarding the biblical curse of Cain, reinforced a prevalent idea of the day used by Christian exegetes to justify slavery in America. Givens carefully demonstrates (as have other authors) that priesthood restriction described in the Book of Abraham was one of birth order and not one of race. Looking at this controversy reveals that some beliefs harbored in certain corners of Christianity (in this case, that black Africans were the descendants of the biblical Cain and therefore belonged to a cursed race) are not truths from God but rather speculations and philosophies of men that have then been co-mingled with scripture for their justification.

Many factors make an understanding of the Book of Abraham difficult to unpack. Just enough papyri and manuscript evidence exist to begin a look at the origins of the Book of Abraham, but there isn’t close to enough of either to arrive at any type of conclusion with any degree of confidence. The overall lack of manuscript and papyri evidence invites tempting quick judgments on the origins of the Book of Abraham.

The most apparent complications are in regard to Joseph Smith’s ability to translate and what relationship the finished product of the Book of Abraham, including the explanations of the included facsimiles, have to the hieroglyphic Egyptian of the scrolls. It is also unclear whether Joseph was actually attempting a translation of Egyptian vignettes or merely providing an interpretation based on the contents of the Book of Abraham and other revelatory items.

Unlike the JST and, to some degree, the Book of Mormon, we don’t have the original transcript of the Book of Abraham. We have only copies. These copies, most commonly known as the Kirtland Egyptian Papers (KEP) don’t contain the whole Book of Abraham, only the earliest segments of the translation. This has led some scholars to see this small segment as evidence that the KEP represents all that the Prophet had translated up to that point, although the actual evidence for that theory is hardly conclusive.⁹

Further, these early manuscript copies of the translation have been used as working papers, not for the translation of the Book of Abraham, but rather for a side project to recover the original language of Adam. Joseph Smith and some participants of the Kirtland “School of the

9. 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* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 157.

Prophets” went beyond the mere translation of the ancient Abrahamic record to (arbitrarily) apply characters from the papyri onto copies of the original transcription. This folding of hieratic Egyptian characters back into the manuscript copies has resulted only in contested ideas of how the translation was completed.

Other obstacles in the understanding of the translation method appear with the introduction of Hebrew lexes into the text of the Book of Abraham. These textual glosses serve to blur the line between Joseph as the translator of the ancient record and Joseph as an active creator of the record. Because of these complicated details, one could easily describe the Book of Abraham as “Mormonism’s most beleaguered scripture.”

There are a few complications with Givens’s (or perhaps Hauglid’s) treatment of the Book of Abraham. Perhaps most visible is the contrast between the treatment of the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham. This, of course, is because the Book of Moses wasn’t produced in conjunction with the appearance of ancient artifacts. The extra accoutrement arriving with Abraham’s record adds layers of nuance to our levels of examination.

Givens noted earlier in the book that Moses and Enoch material in the Book of Moses have similarities (often quite striking) with ancient sources, which are shown to demonstrate Joseph Smith’s tapping into ancient ideas. Givens also details parallels of the Book of Abraham’s heavenly council and those featured in Mesopotamian and Ugaritic literature. However, Givens also takes the time to examine other ancient parallels posited by scholars to the Book of Abraham. Some of these ring true to Givens, while others are treated as superfluous *parallelomania*. Readers will have to draw their own conclusions on Givens’s approach, but this discussion does raise important considerations and should be at the forefront of future research on the Book of Abraham.

Givens explores potential problems with the possibility of the Book of Abraham’s physically existing on one of the Egyptian scrolls as a secondary text. This idea has been called the “Missing Scroll Theory” and is largely based on the fact that only 13% of the Egyptian texts owned by Joseph Smith are still extant.¹⁰ One possible problem notes that the Book of Abraham translation apparently references the Book of Breathings made by Isis, linking the text of the Book of Abraham not to an Abrahamic record on the scrolls but, mistakenly, to the first vignette

10. John Gee, “A History of the Joseph Smith Papyri and the Book of Abraham” (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 11.

of the Book of Breathings. This would weaken the likelihood of the Book of Abraham's also being contained on the scroll. Givens explains:

In Abraham 1:12 the text reads, referring to Abraham being placed on an altar: "I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record." In the next verse, Abraham 1:14, referring to the representations of certain Egyptian gods under the altar, the text reads: "that you may have an understanding of these gods, I have given you the fashion of them in the figures at the beginning." This immediately suggests that the recovered Fragment-A, which was attached to the recovered Facsimile 1, should contain the text of the Book of Abraham [which it doesn't]. (155)

This appears to be troubling evidence against the Book of Abraham's existing as a separate narrative on the scrolls, but this difficulty is diminished as these internal references of the Book of Abraham to the first facsimile (1:12b–14) are written in the upper margin of the oldest of the copies of the translation, suggesting these verses aren't original to the Book of Abraham but rather a clarification added to the text after the first manuscript copy was created.¹¹

Joseph Smith — History

Givens provides a historical summary of the published history of Joseph Smith. He then asks, "What does its elevation to scriptural status signify? Why this particular version — and how significantly does it vary from other versions?" (8)

Givens traces the evolution and various editions of Joseph Smith's history, noting that the demeanor of the accounts changes poignantly from the 1832 account to the 1838 account due to the persecution he and the Saints had suffered at the hands of those who should have been supportive Christian brothers. Whereas the 1832 account contained an implicit condemnation of the denominations, the 1838 account made it explicit. The 1838 version, reworked into the 1842 letter to Chicago newspaper editor John Wentworth, later became the canonized version in the Pearl of Great Price.

11. For further discussion on the textual gloss in Abraham 1:12b–14, see Mark J. Johnson, "Scriptures with Pictures: Methodology, Unexamined Assumptions, and the Study of the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 25 (2017): 16.

Givens has much to say regarding the canonized history of Joseph Smith as it fits into his thesis of controversy. Givens notes that the teachings and tenets of the Restored Church are a broad rejection of the creedal Christian notion of *sola scriptura*, which is the doctrine of the Bible as the sole source of truth and doctrine with other religious teachings and writings being subordinate. The witness of Joseph is that he had to abandon a search for truth via the Bible and instead found it in a divine theophany, and that speaks volumes against this Christian tradition.

The Church of Jesus Christ claims not to be merely a reformed church but rather a restored church. This has resulted in finding our Latter-day Saint authoritative heritage not in historical/traditional lines nor in a mere application of Biblical principles but in a new, divinely ordained authority. As such, the validity of this ordained authority has become inseparable from the man who was ordained. If Joseph didn't receive this commission and ordination, the Latter-day Saint claims of authority are nil. Because of this, Givens notes, a belief and testimony of the Latter-day Saint authority is necessarily based on a belief in the historicity of the First Vision and the Prophet Joseph Smith's other divine experiences. This curious circumstance is expounded by Givens:

Latter-day Saint testimony has come to be shaped more in terms of assent to intellectual propositions than as confession of spiritual transformation — as in the Puritan or evangelical traditions. Church of Jesus Christ leaders have even advocated a witnessing template that gives priority to the truthfulness (i.e., historicity) of the Book of Mormon, or of Smith's calling (i.e., historically specific appointment) as prophet, rather than to the spiritual rebirth occasioned by these discoveries. (225)

Givens goes on to note that while the Latter-day Saint community emphatically does not worship Joseph Smith, many items built into our belief systems necessarily keep Joseph near the center (such as the inclusion of a newspaper editorial into the 1844 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants that canonizes the idea that Joseph Smith had done more for human salvation second only to Jesus Christ).¹² The focal point of Latter-day Saint theology is Jesus Christ, but because our religion was received by revelation, the Prophet Joseph Smith is an obligatory component of our testimonies. The canonization of the Joseph Smith

12. *Revelations in Context: The Stories Behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 304–305.

story, then, is necessarily the historical, doctrinal, and theological foundation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Articles of Faith

Givens's focus for the Articles of Faith is expressed by asking, "Given Smith's often-expressed disdain for creeds, why did the church move to canonize these expressions of church belief, and why at this time? How do they, and how do they not, function as a church creed?"(8). The Articles of Faith are explored by Givens as a document of creedal status yet a curiosity for a church founded in large part because the existing Christian creeds of the day were all corrupt.

Givens outlines early forerunners of the Articles of Faith, such as versions by Oliver Cowdery and Parley P. Pratt (249–53), showing that these attempts were largely demonstrating a sense of sameness with other churches rather than setting forth differences. Givens views this in contrast to the older Christian sects, who formulated their creeds "as boundary markers to elucidate heresy, as well as to codify ambiguous or newly emergent doctrines" (241). The final version of the Articles mirrors the same priorities as the creeds perfectly, affirming some Christian tenets while repudiating others. Givens goes on to note that the Articles of Faith are comprised of ecclesiological items, "how the church was organized and what the ordinances, scriptures and spiritual practices entailed" (264).

In conjunction with his study of the Articles of Faith and the function of creeds, Givens also details Joseph Smith's attitudes toward the creeds of Christendom. Joseph Smith held anti-creedal positions in part due to what he learned in the Sacred Grove but also because he felt the creeds were constrictive in their nature, which limited men and women from seeking knowledge from God. Joseph is on record as saying: "I believe all that God ever revealed & I've never heard of a man being damned for believing too much, but they are damned for unbelieving."¹³

The Latter-day Saint experience is one not handcuffed by formal creeds. Indeed, many of the religious doctrines in the Church of Jesus Christ are based on what we tend to call "correct principles." Brigham Young encapsulated this wide sweep of beliefs, saying, "I want to say to my friends

13. "Discourse, 16 June 1844-A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/4>, Spelling and punctuation modernized.

that we believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.”¹⁴

The Articles are statements of belief, but they are largely non-binding. Members of the Church can, as an example, obtain a temple recommend even if they don’t believe all the tenets of the Articles of Faith. One need not believe in being subject to kings, rulers, magistrates, and the like to be in good standing with Church authority. Indeed, members of the Church may entertain a very broad array of beliefs, for example, that the earth is flat or that the moon landings were faked, without fear of disciplinary action.

Translation Theories

It has been previously mentioned that Givens is acutely interested in Joseph’s methods of translation as well as Joseph’s understanding of his own role as prophet and seer. In *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, Givens explores the notion of various artifacts and influences from antiquity acting as inspirational catalysts for the Prophet Joseph to create new scriptural narratives and expand on growing doctrinal themes. He writes regarding the so-called “catalyst theory” of the production of the Book of Abraham:

The value of such a possibility [that the papyri acted as a catalyst for new revelation] ... is that it brackets the questions of historicity and accuracy altogether and enables a new range of questions to emerge. Instead of evaluating Smith’s work by looking back through the lens of contemporary Egyptology, we may learn the workings of Smith’s prophetic imagination and his own unique cultural moment by entering more fully into his nineteenth-century context. (180)

Along these lines, Givens sees the Book of Abraham as being born from the phenomena of “Egyptomania,” predominant in the early nineteenth-century (181). Should this be the case, it is fair to ask if the Book of Abraham texts reflect any of the popular tropes associated with early nineteenth-century understandings of Egypt. Notably absent from the Book of Abraham are references to pyramids or obelisks. No hints of sphinxes, scarabs, and sarcophagi are present in the text. Even mummies, a significant source of curiosity among the residents of Kirtland, are absolutely absent in the Book of Abraham. The magical view of hieroglyphic writing was very present contemporaneously with

14. Brigham Young, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 16.

the translation, but this also is missing within the translation itself.¹⁵ The environment immediate to the mummies and scrolls in the Kirtland era is steeped in this Egyptomania, but this phenomenon is a non-factor regarding the translated product.

One could argue that the Egyptomania of the day may account for the mummies and scrolls extracted from their tombs and eventually making their way into the hands of Joseph Smith. Beyond this, any connection to this cultural vogue is vague at best. Andrew H. Hedges summarizes this approach, noting: "Had the ideas of his neighbors been Joseph Smith's inspiration for the Book of Abraham, in short, the book would have been a very different thing than it actually is."¹⁶

Givens puts forth the novel idea that Joseph Smith's understanding of "translate" was also intertwined with the physical translation of the prophets, especially that of Enoch, who was caught up to heaven with his people. Following this interesting paradigm, Joseph would have "translated" the scriptures to elevate them to a more sacred sphere of true doctrine, being as they are in God's own bosom (D&C 35:20). He elaborates that:

"translation" might be better defined in Smith's case as the ongoing task of transmitting and assembling an earthly counterpart to an original, heavenly *urtext*, prompted by whatever oracular devices and textual fragments were at hand to catalyze, inspire, or trigger his prophetic imagination. (95)

This definition of translation is particularly adept, as it can be applied to all the types of changes Joseph Smith made to the biblical text. Note however that the definition is in part particularly adept because it is also particularly unspecific. While I take no real issue with his observations on scripture building on the small scale (such as the numerous doctrinal harmonizations in the JST), I see some difficulty in assigning this definition of translation to the larger revealed narratives. One such instance involves the production of the Book of Moses. Givens quotes Katherine Flake¹⁷

15. Abraham 1:14 does have a non-contextual reference to hieroglyphics, but this segment is among the added material that likely was not part of the original dictated translation mentioned above. This strongly implies that the reference to the hieroglyphics was an addition to the text by Joseph Smith or one of his fellow participants in the original language project.

16. Andrew H. Hedges, "A Wanderer in a Strange Land: Abraham in America, 1800–1850," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant, Studies in the Book of Abraham* 3, eds. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 187.

17. See Kathleen Flake, "Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith's Narrative Canon," *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 3 (October 2007): 507.

about the working dynamics of receiving the restorative revelations of the Book of Moses, saying, “it appears that when [Joseph] read he saw events, not words. What he saw, he verbalized to his scribe” (92).

Granted that while the Prophet Joseph kept the particulars of his methods to himself, the text of the Book of Moses can supply some necessary clues. Turning to Moses 1, we find textual features such as authentic Hebraisms (see examples of *antenantiosis* in Moses 1:28 or the use of compound prepositions in Moses 1:1), established biblical figures of speech (such as *litotes* in Moses 1:10 or *synecdoche* in Moses 1:11), and accurate examples of poetic parallelism (such as *antithetical parallelism* in 1:4 or *synthetic parallelism* in Moses 1:39).

Moses chapter 1 also features onomastic Hebrew wordplay. Nathan J. Arp has demonstrated that the name *Moses* in this chapter is used in relation to its meaning in Egyptian (to give birth) as well as showing additional parallel with the Hebrew meaning of his name (to draw out).¹⁸

From a perspective of narrative discourse, Joseph Smith’s word choices have the lineament of an ancient biblical text. In this light, it seems probable Joseph was given the verbiage of the revelation instead of describing witnessed events according to his own “prophetic imagination.”

The aforementioned historical-critical look at the scripture text, examining the cultural environment of Joseph Smith, really works only when practiced outside the text. Frank Kermode notes the limitations of the method: “The historical critic is always seeking something in the text that is not the text, something the text of itself, is not seeking to provide.”¹⁹

Givens makes note of the translation time of the book of Abraham. He maintains emphatically that Joseph Smith translated only up to Abraham 2:18 in the months following purchasing the scrolls in 1835. This early translation effort resulted in the aforementioned KEP copies, one of which includes up to Abraham 2:18. This suggests that this was all that was translated up to this point. This seems to be collaborated by the first published installment of the Book of Abraham, which also contained the translation up through 2:18. This would leave what Givens terms the “Nauvoo translation” of Abraham 2:19–5:21 to be completed in the days before their publication in 1842.

18. Nathan J. Arp, “Joseph Knew First: Moses, the Egyptian Son,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 189–90.

19. Frank Kermode, “The Canon” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 607.

The idea of an early translated portion which was completed in 1835 and a later portion which was translated in 1842 seems to work on the surface. However, a look at the quantity of material translated versus the length of time the translation sessions occurred raises significant questions about the plausibility of these two translation periods.

If the first translation period proceeded only to chapter 2 verse 18 in July and later in October of 1835, the second translation period necessarily would have continued at 2:19 and moved through 5:21 over the space of two days in March of 1842. Muhlestein and Hansen have noted that the rate of this second translation period would have occurred at *nine* times the rate of the 1835 translation.²⁰

Another difficulty in having the remainder of the translation occur in 1842 is that Joseph was quoting teachings from the Nauvoo translation portion of the Book of Abraham well before the church moved to Nauvoo.²¹ In addition to this, the prophet occasionally taught items related to Abraham that appear to be beyond the five chapters of published material from 1842. One example of this is was taught by the Prophet in May of 1841:

[The] Everlasting covenant was made between three personages before the organization of this earth, and relates to their dispensation of things to men on the earth; these personages, according to Abraham's record, are called: God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer; and God the third, the Witness or Testator.²²

The material from the so-called Nauvoo translation appearing before this second translation period of March 1842 is a strong indicator that Joseph had translated much more material at a much earlier date.

Givens's argument for the 1842 translation period hangs on a strict adherence to the Prophet's own journals and their cataloguing the times the Prophet was engaged in translating. However, Givens himself has radically redefined the term "translation" as has been mentioned above. This newly defined terminology seriously undermines a reliable translation timeline based on the information provided in Joseph's journals.

20. Muhlestein and Hansen, "The Work of Translating," 143.

21. Muhlestein and Hansen note as an example the name "Shinehah" of Abraham 3:13 is also used in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in sections 86, 96 and 98. See Muhlestein and Hansen, "The Work of Translating," 144.

22. Joseph Smith, "Discourse, circa May 1841, as Reported By Unknown Scribe-A," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-circa-may-1841-as-reported-by-unknown-scribe-a/1>.

Joseph the Seer and Speculative Theology

A main inquiry of *The Pearl of Greatest Price* attempts to uncover Joseph Smith's own understanding of his prophetic role. One possibility sets up Enoch as the prototype prophet for Joseph to follow. Givens notes that, "Enoch was the single most important figure for Smith's self-conceiving and understanding of his prophetic role, and the prophecy of Enoch was his template for its successful implementation" (60). In preparing his followers to access the presence of God, whether it be through the founding of Zion or through the temple, Enoch was the example *par excellence*. This insight may illuminate how Joseph saw himself in the role of prophet and seer, but as Givens himself notes, explicit conformation from Joseph Smith is sorely lacking.

Givens is also greatly interested in seeing Joseph Smith in his own environment and culture and how this background influenced his thoughts, methods, and identity. He writes:

While there is obvious value in attempting a definition of *translation* as the term might have operated in Smith's mind, this section attempts to paint a picture of a dynamic, conceptual universe, much of which may have been within his cultural orbit, that may go some way to enlarge and enrich our view of the term as it operated in Smith's mind and historical moment alike. (184)

Givens, who is clearly influenced by the ideas of literary critic Harold Bloom, portrays Joseph as a savant who fashions new realms through a subconscious gift of spiritual intuition, a prophet whose creativity and inspiration appear to create and shape new texts, new doctrines, and a new theology that leaves traditional creedal Christianity far behind. Givens suggests Joseph Smith's "entire habit of mind" (193) was one that assimilated any available religious, spiritual, and mystic debris around him to create order to his own universe. This casts Joseph as acting as a *bricoleur*. Following terminology employed by French anthropologist Claus Lévi-Strauss, Givens suggests Joseph's theological and scriptural productions are an act of *bricolage* (creation from any varied materials in proximity). This is akin to the process Barlow describes as *barauification*, a term he bases on the Hebrew verb *bārā*, meaning 'to create.'²³

This model of bricolage in Joseph Smith's speculative theology is a useful template in understanding the way Joseph framed the doctrines of the restoration. By and large, Givens provides a logical sequence for

23. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, xxxii.

the evolution of these doctrines. However, this argument for a *bric-à-brac* construction of the scriptures translated by Joseph Smith ignores the actual methods of translation as well as the statements of those who were involved in the process. David F. Holland has noted regarding Joseph Smith's role in the process:

In his forays into the ancient world — whether the Book of Mormon, or the book of Abraham, or his inspired translation of the Bible — he was ever the vehicle for other men's histories, always the receiver, the transcriber, the transmitter of knowledge about the ancient world, not the producer. He simply gave his modern readers the records as he encountered them, translated but otherwise unaffected.²⁴

It can certainly be noted that Joseph felt free to alter the texts of his revelations after he received them. The additions of Hebrew into the translation of the Book of Abraham²⁵ or the twice-revised verses in the JST²⁶ are evidence of this. The question of how much latitude Joseph Smith had to voice the revelations in his own words is still unanswered and will likely be debated for years to come.

Givens concludes his survey of the various translation theories by noting: "Some believers and nonbelievers alike have sought to find alternatives to Smith's designation as either translator of ancient records or conniving con man." Fortunately, there are "adjustments [available] to nineteenth-century paradigms that have offered millions [!] of believers a way forward, relying on faith without forsaking reasonableness" (201).

This new edifice of understanding is designed to save believers from simplistic, persisting (and perhaps embarrassing) ideas such as notions of Smith's translating actual ancient records of para-biblical stories. Indeed, seeing Smith drinking deeply from the well of spirituality and enlightenment while tapping into long lost ancient thought helps any

24. David F. Holland, "American Visionaries and their Approaches to the Past," *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, eds. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 47.

25. Matthew Grey, "The Word of the Lord in the Original" *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, 274.

26. Thomas A. Wayment, "Intertextuality and the Purpose of Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible" in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources*, eds. Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 93–98.

student of the restored gospel avoid what some see as the repugnant literalism of actual revelation from God.

Perhaps there is an irony in all of this.

Canon

Undeniably, one of the most important aspects of the Pearl of Great Price is that it is a tangible proof of modern revelation and an open canon. Givens's discussion of canon invites a look at our current day and what is regarded as scripture in the Church of Jesus Christ. This is especially true as the members of the Restored Church regard the words of its living prophets as scripture. The most prominent example of this today is "The Family: A Proclamation to the World."

Even as recently as the October 2019 semi-annual General Conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks emphasized the authoritative status of the proclamation on the family by noting it bears the signatures of the then-current fifteen apostles. The discussion of the debated definition of the family will have the proclamation's authority in the background and will indeed touch on the terrain that is covered by "canon."

What with the nature of an open canon, *The Pearl of Greatest Price* might find itself somewhat out of date should other items be lifted up to the rank of official scripture.

Conclusion

The Pearl of Greatest Price makes numerous contributions to the study of Joseph Smith and the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Its benefit is in exposing the reader to the beauty of the message of the Pearl. Givens correctly observes: "it is the least studied, written about, understood, and appreciated book in the LDS canon, but it outweighs in theological consequence and influence all the rest" (3).

Givens provides fascinating nuance to the work of Joseph Smith in conjunction with Christianity contemporary with Joseph's day. Joseph's words and works sent shockwaves through the foundations of the churches. As such, I would argue that Joseph Smith didn't necessarily set out to set at defiance the current creedal conventions of Christianity, but the works he produced and the doctrine and theology that followed certainly had that as a result.

The concept of bricolage has interesting potential for understanding Joseph's learning and framing of the doctrines of the kingdom, and Givens makes a very good case for its use in Joseph Smith's theological world-building. However, applying this method to describe the production

of ancient scripture doesn't take the revealed restoration of ancient scripture seriously on its own terms. Any scripture touted as a restored ancient record needs to be examined from inside with its own words before it is held up in comparison to the decade in which it came to light.

The historical-critical genre of the New Mormon History certainly has its limitations, chief among them the built-in failure to deal with the divine, which can result only in recreating an empty replica of the real Church of Jesus Christ. While I would personally like to see the Lord as a participant in this book instead of merely having a singular focus on Joseph Smith, it would be unfair to criticize Givens for not writing a book he didn't intend to write.

As an introduction of the Prophet Joseph and his work in the Restoration to an academic audience, *The Pearl of Greatest Price* is a very good resource I hope gets wide exposure. Despite its secular approach, it presents Joseph Smith as a monumentally important character who bears further study, and his scriptural projects (especially those that resulted in the Pearl of Great Price) deserve considerable attention.

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