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## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

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One of the most intriguing and complex stories associated with latter-day scripture has to do with the background of the book of Abraham. I emphasize the word background, which stresses scenery that inconspicuously fleshes out a painting and contrasts with that which is in the foreground. Chiefly in the foreground, of course, is the book of Abraham itself. Concerning this book of scripture, I add my voice to yours in thanksgiving to our God for the wondrous and significant fifteen-page section of scripture we call the book of Abraham. The principles, doctrine, history, and information presented in those few pages beautifully buttress some of the foundation stones in our theology. I love the book of Abraham. I love its thought. I love its spirit.

In addition to the book itself, I am fascinated by the story of Joseph Smith receiving some Egyptian mummies and papyri in 1835, the impact of this experience upon the Prophet, and his subsequent reception of the book of Abraham from the Lord. One of the reasons that story holds such attraction is that there still is opportunity for Latter-day Saint students and researchers to discover some of the evidential facts still hiding in the nebulous background of the book of Abraham story and to bring those evidential facts to the foreground. Why? Because Latter-day Saints have never been able accurately to piece together the full story of how the Joseph Smith mummies and papyri got from Egypt to America, with who did it, why, and when. This, however, is only a portion of the intriguing, unsolved story.

The primary reason the book of Abraham has been in the public eye in recent years is that some of the papyri associated with the Prophet Joseph Smith

and the book of Abraham were surprisingly discovered in 1966 and turned over to the Church in 1967. Some of you may remember that Monday, November 27, 1967, when the media broadcast that President N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency had that day received from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City some eleven fragments of papyrus, one of which was the papyrus from which our Facsimile No. 1 was copied. For members throughout the Church, it was a stunning announcement. For ninety-six years, Church authorities and members had generally understood that all the Egyptian materials, four mummies, rolls of papyrus, and associated items--had burned in the Chicago fire of 1871, where it had been thought that all of the mummies and all of the papyri were on exhibit.

But the announcement that eleven fragments of the "Joseph Smith papyri" had been "discovered" in one of the many drawers of the Metropolitan Museum clearly meant that this understanding was inaccurate. Following the announcement of the discovery, scholars and students of the scriptures again turned their attention to the story behind the book of Abraham. Where had the mummies and papyri come from in the first place? How did Joseph Smith get them? What did he do with them? How did they get out of the hands of the Church? How did it happen that some of the material escaped the 1871 Chicago fire? These, and many other questions came to everyone's mind, and we all started to concentrate on them. The following picture emerged, explaining, in part, the history of the mummies and papyri that Joseph Smith eventually acquired.

#### The Impact of Napoleon

As students of history know, the last few years of the eighteenth century saw the meteoric rise of a bright and powerful star across the European horizon. Young Napoleon Bonaparte had won France's respect on October 6, 1795, when after one night of planning, his 5,000 government troops repelled in one hour some 30,000 Parisian mobbers. He became the darling of France, and in less than a year, the stocky Corsican had conquered the whole of northern Italy, defeated the armies of Austria, Sardinia, and the Pope. Then, in 1798, Napoleon turned his eyes toward Egypt. Before the summer was over, twenty-eight year old Napoleon Bonaparte stood as the unrival master of 5,000 year old Egypt.

Accompanying Napoleon on his Egyptian campaign was a considerable body of scientific and artistic personnel. These learned men were astonished at what they saw. The pyramids, monuments, tombs, silent stone cities, obelisks, and great statues all seemed to cry out to them. Artists were in top demand to record the scenes. Reports and discoveries by the scholarly contingent soon drew the Western world's attention toward the land of the pharaohs. Shortly thereafter, a series of books by Edme Francois Jomard entitled La Description de l'Egypte began publication. The series appeared from 1807 to 1826. It swept Europe by storm. Worldwide interest in Egyptian antiquities fanned itself a searing blaze. Egypt was soon overrun with scientific expeditions, adventures, soldiers of fortune, robbers of catacombs, and hunters of artifacts. One writer about the period: "These were the great days of excavating. Everything to which a fancy was taken, from a scarab to an obelisk, was just

appropriated, and if there was a difference with a brother-excavator, one just laid for him with a gun." (Howard Carter, The Tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen, p. 8.)

One of the best descriptions of the period is given by Giovanni Belzoni, an extraordinary six-foot, seven-inch one-time circus strongman who had gone to Egypt to sell hydraulic machinery but stayed to rob tombs, became a well-known fortune hunter, and eventually to die in an expedition to Tombouctou (Timbuktu). After describing the entrance of a tomb, Belzoni says:

After the exertion of entering into such a place, through a passage of fifty, a hundred, three hundred, or perhaps six hundred yards, nearly overcome, I sought a resting-place, found one, and contrived to sit; but when my weight bore on the body of an Egyptian, it crushed like a band-box. I naturally had recourse to my hands to sustain my weight, but they found no better support; so that I sank altogether among the broken mummies, with a crash of bones, rags, and wooden cases, which raised such a dust as kept me motionless for a quarter of an hour, waiting till it subsided again. I could not remove from the place, however, without increasing it, and every step I took I crushed a mummy in some part or other. Once I was conducted from such a place to another resembling it through a passage of about twenty feet in length, no wider than a body could be forced through. It was choked with mummies, and I could not pass without putting my face in contact with that of some decayed Egyptian; but as the passage inclined downwards, my own weight helped me on; however, I could not avoid being covered with bones, legs, arms, and heads rolling from above. Thus, I proceeded from one cave to another, all full of mummies piled up in various ways, some standing, some lying, and some on their heads. The purpose of my researches was to rob the Egyptians of their papyri; of which I found a few hidden in their breasts, under their arms, in the space above the knees, on the legs, and covered by numerous folds of cloth that envelop the mummy. (Stanley Mays, The Great Belzoni, London: Putnam, 1959, page 160.)

Into this setting stride some known and some yet to be identified personalities who are going to play roles unbeknownst to themselves in unearthing some mummies and papyri that eventually are going to reach the hands of an American, the Prophet Joseph Smith.

#### From Egypt to America: Four Accounts

It is at this point in the story that the first major unknowns present themselves. Who found the mummies that the Prophet Joseph Smith later acquired? How did they get from Egypt to America? These are basic questions. To answer them, I have identified four accounts. At this writing, no Latter-day Saint researcher or student of the scriptures knows which of the accounts contains the more accurate report. The four accounts are: (1) a report given by Oliver Cowdery in a December 31, 1835, letter in The Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate, a Church-owned newspaper in Kirtland, Ohio; (2) a report by Parley

P. Pratt in the July 1842 Millennial Star, a Church-owned publication in England; (3) a report by Professor N. L. Nelson of the Brigham Young Academy at Provo, Utah, in an address of March 1885, and carried in part by the Academic Review in its March issue; (4) in the May 16, 1844, St. Louis Evening Gazette, a newspaper report reprinted in Henry Lewis's The Valley of the Mississippi, published, by the University of Michigan. The four accounts will now be presented.

1. The Oliver Cowdery Report

Oliver Cowdery's letter is to William Frye, Esquire, of Gilead, Calhoun County, Illinois, and is dated December 22, 1835, and printed in the next issue of The Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate. This account has been the traditional source of information on the background story of the book of Abraham.

Upon the subject of the Egyptian records, or rather the writings of Abraham and Joseph, I may say a few words. This record is beautifully written on papyrus with black, and a small part, red ink or paint, in perfect preservation. The characters are such as you find upon the coffins of mummies, hieroglyphics, &c. with many characters or letters exactly like the present, (though probably not quite so square,) form of the Hebrew without points.

These records were obtained from one of the catacombs in Egypt, near the place where once stood the renowned city of Thebes, by the celebrated French traveller Antonio Lebolo; in the year 1831. He procured license from Mehemet Ali, then Viceroy of Egypt, under the protection of Chevalier Drovetti, the French Consul, in the year 1828; employed 433 men four months and two days, (if I understood correctly, Egyptian or Turkish soliders,) at from four to six cents per diem, each man; entered the catacombs June 7, 1831, and obtained eleven Mummies. There were several hundred Mummies in the same catacomb; about one hundred embalmed after the first order, and deposited and placed in niches, and two or three hundred after the second and third order, and laid upon the floor or bottom of the grand cavity, the two last orders of embalmed were so decayed that they could not be removed, and only eleven of the first, found in the niches. On his way from Alexandria to Paris he put in a Trieste, and after ten days illness, expired. This was in the year 1832. Previous to his decease, he made a will of the whole to Mr. Michael H. Chandler, then in Philadelphia, Pa. his nephew, whom he supposed to have been in Ireland. Accordingly the whole were sent to Dublin, addressed according, and Mr. Chandler's friends ordered them sent to New York, where they were received at the custom house, in the winter or spring of 1833. In April of the same year Mr. Chandler paid the duties upon his Mummies, and took possession of the same.

Then, according to this account, Chandler exhibits the mummies and papyri for several years throughout the country before working his way to Kirtland, Ohio, where the Prophet Joseph Smith acquires the Egyptian antiquities.

2. The Parley P. Pratt Report

Note carefully the differences in this report by Elder Parley P. Pratt in his July 1842 Millennial Star report:

Singular is the providence by which this ancient record fell into the hands of the servant of the Lord, Joseph Smith. A gentleman, travelling in Egypt, made a selection of several mummies, of the best kind of embalming, and of course in the best state of preservation; on his way to England he died, bequeathing them to a gentleman of the name of Chandler. They arrived in the Thames, but it was found the gentleman was in America, they were then forwarded to New York and advertised, when Mr. Chandler came forward and claimed them.

The scenario from Chandler's supposed New York acquisition of the Egyptian antiquities until Joseph Smith acquired them is the same for this account.

### 3. The N. L. Nelson Report

Note carefully the differences in Professor N. L. Nelson's account given at Provo, Utah, in 1885. Although but twenty-three years of age at the time, Nelson has been regarded in other matters as a fairly reliable reporter:

The manner in which the papyrus bearing this ancient record was transferred from a musty catacomb of Egypt to the hands of the Prophet Joseph Smith is no less wonderful than providential. Four mummies, secured by a certain English Minister Plenipotentiary to Egypt, were bequeathed to his nephew, a Mr. Chandler, of New York.

The transfer from New York to Joseph Smith would also be the same for this account

### 4. The St. Louis Evening Gazette Report

Quoted in The Valley of the Mississippi by Henry Lewis is a letter taken from the St. Louis Evening Gazette of May 16, 1844, in which the writer describes for readers his travels. One of his travels has been to Nauvoo:

"On approaching the home of the Prophet one notices a sign above the left side of the door on which the words 'Ancient Records--Egyptian Mummies' are painted in large letters." After describing the experience of seeing the mummies, the writer reported the story that he recalled was told to him:

A soldier serving in the East had sent these mummies to one of his relatives in New York--an ignorant Irishman who hoped that the contents of the big box would repay him for the large freight bill he had paid. When he opened the box, however, and found only a couple of shrunken human cadavers, he became so enraged that he would surely have torn all the mummies to pieces if he had not been stopped by a chance passer-by, a more sensible man, who apprised him of their value. We do not know how these mummies came into the possession of the Prophet, but we believe that they were sent to the erudite author of the 'Book of Mormon' in order that he might translate the hieroglyphics. . . .

It should be quite clear that the early Saints were not really sure how Michael H. Chandler acquired the Egyptian antiquities that he sold to the Saints. Oliver Cowdery's report would have Lebolo and Chandler in an uncle-nephew relationship; Parley P. Pratt would have the mummies acquired by a gentleman traveling in the East, probably British, who then bequeaths them to another gentleman named Chandler; N. L. Nelson would have the antiquities acquired by an

"English Minister Plenipotentiary" to Egypt, who was an uncle to a Mr. Chandler; and the letter in Lewis's book would have the antiquities acquired by a soldier serving in the East who then sends the mummies to a relative in New York.

#### A Look at the Oliver Cowdery Account

We shall now give close attention to the Oliver Cowdery account. However, we must first recognize that the account is really the Michael H. Chandler account. Obviously, whatever Oliver Cowdery wrote for the benefit of the Saints represented what he had been told--or what he remembered that he had been told--by Michael H. Chandler.

As we analyze the Chandler-Cowdery account, we see that (1) several details from it seem to be possible--and one of them attained that status only recently, (2) while other details presently elude confirmation, (3) while still other details appear to be inaccurate and fly in the face of present information.

Obviously, this latter condition is not because Oliver Cowdery is a deceiver. Latter-day Saints know Oliver Cowdery. We can trust his honesty. He is simply relaying that which he and the Saints were told by Chandler.

Now, there is in the Chandler-Cowdery account one major detail that only recently has become significant, or is looming closer to possible confirmation. Chandler named Antonio Lebolo as the discoverer. Why is this now meaningful? Certainly not because Lebolo was a "celebrated traveller" as Chandler told the Saints. He is quite uncelebrated, in fact. Even so, the naming of Lebolo as the discoverer has generally been regarded as authentic simply due to the insignificance of the man and the unlikelihood of his name ever cropping up without reason somewhere.

Why then, is the Lebolo item of interest now? Simply this: Lebolo's name is known and involved in one important 1820 discovery in Thebes, Egypt. From this discovery, thirteen to fourteen mummies are known to have been taken. These mummies--or their caskets--and their attendant papyri are strewn across Europe in the major Egyptological museums in London, Leiden, Berlin, Paris, and Turin, Italy, and represent basically two family groupings. We often bury ourselves near loved ones. Earlier cultures did similarly. This discovery now becomes meaningful to Latter-day Saints because, after reading two of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian papyrus fragments that were turned over to the Church, Dr. Hugh Nibley in his The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri (Deseret Book, 1975, pp. 3-6) concludes that two of the papyrus fragments (No. X and No. XI) are directly connected to one of the family of mummies that was discovered in 1820 by Lebolo. Says Dr. Nibley "It has now become apparent, thanks to the diligent researchers of the Dutch scholar B.H. Stricker, that our Joseph Smith Book of Breathings (fragments No. X and XI) is one of the very special and limited and uniquely valuable class documents clustering around a single priestly family of upper Egypt in the first century A.D." (p. 3). "There is only one cast of characters in the drama, and the owner of the Joseph Smith papyri was a member of it" (p. 4).

Because of the textual relationship found to exist between the Joseph Smith Papyri X and XI and some papyri of the 1820 Lebolo mummies now in European museums, Latter-day Saints will be intensely interested in a rather rare eye-

witness account of the 1820 Egyptian unearthing. That the account is related to the Joseph Smith papyri and may possibly (no one knows at this point) even represent the account of the unearthing of one or more of the mummies that Joseph Smith eventually obtained makes this report that much more interesting and valuable (only time will tell) to Latter-day Saints. The account is within the writings of a Dutch Egyptian scholar, B. H. Stricker, who is describing the Lebolo mummy in the Leiden museum. He says:

The mummy and other antiquities purchased by the dealers were discovered by the residents of the little village of Sheikh-*adb-el-Qurna*, located on the border of the Nile opposite of Loexor, in the winter of the year 1819/20. In that year Egypt was much traveled by an English tourist, Sir Frederick Henniker. . . .Henniker arrived at Leoxor during January and spent a few days here visiting the antiquities . During his excursion to the city of the dead on the western border he had the opportunity to also watch the native excavators, and about this episode he relates the following (taken from Notes, During a Visit to Egypt, Nubia, the Oasis, Mount Sinai, and Jerusalem, London, 1823.): 'I was standing by when the resurrection men found a sepulchre, they offered me the haul, unopened for four guineas. It proves to be Grecian-Egyptian, the first of its kind hitherto discovered; three chambers, fourteen coffins, on each of which was placed a bunch of sycamore branches; these branches fell to atoms at the touch--there are also coffinless bodies, having the appearance of leather, dried in the same manner as is still practiced by the Capuchin friars in Sicily. . . .on the principal coffin is (a Greek) inscription: The hieroglyphical figures testify to the degeneracy of the art; the papyrus found in this case, is not, as is usual, rolled up, but folded flat; the body was enveloped in thirty linen wrappers, the hands and mouth gilt . . . .Soter the son of Cornelius Pollius was the father of the Sensaos preserved in our (Leiden) Museum and there is, therefore, no doubt that Henniker witnessed with his own eyes the opening of the grave from which more than six museums received their Roman-Egyptian mummies.'

But he was not the only one. Such a remarkable discovery cannot help but set in motion the wheels of the already flourishing trade in antiquities, and so we watch appear on stage a certain Lebolo whom we know from the information of Belzoni and others to be the private collector and agent of the French Consul and dealer in antiquities Drovetti. This Lebolo gave an account of the discovery and sent this on with the mummy which was sold by Drovetti to Turin. Here it came into the hands of the curator of the collection, G. Di San Quintino who in an article. . . explains the substance of it in his own words. This articles was printed in his 'Lezioni Archeologiche' (Lectures on Archaeology), Turin 1824, and was devoted to the description of this mummy.



'This Mummy,' says San Quintino, 'was discovered by a traveler of Piemonte, Mr. Lebolo, in a deep tomb near the old Thebes near the Libyan side of the Nile at what is now the village of Gournah. The structure of this tomb is not different from that of other ones to be found there in large numbers. . . .'

Then after the grave has been found, the loot will have to be divided. Now I am combining with the information of Reuvens that which I myself have been able to find in Egyptological literature. Lebolo acts as the seller. He seems to have arrived immediately and evidently was the person who pulled the strings of this entire excavation. Buyers are the few consuls or tourists who are present at Loexor; they are all persons who collected on a large scale and whose names, therefore, are still known.

Henniker received from this discovery only the mummy with belongings of the most prominent member of the entombed family, Soter the Archon. . . .

The grave of Soter was found in the neighborhood of the hamlet of Sheikh-abd-el-Qurna on the northern ridge of the region covered by the antique city on the western border of the Nile. It was, in Lebolo's words: 'in fondo del sua pozzo fabbricato di mattoni e tutto ornato internamente di pitture diverse.' (the bottom of a well made with bricks and completely decorated inside with many paintings), and, therefore, could possibly be identified with the numerous open graves on that site. According to my knowledge this has not yet happened. There is in the entire Theban necropolis a great uncertainty about the places where antiquities from the Greek-Roman period can be found. In the city of the dead of Loexor there was no lack of findings of this kind, but none of the older ones can be located with certainty. (Jay M. Todd, Saga of the Book of Abraham, Deseret Book, 1969, see pp. 44-52.)

Well, what does this long quote of Stricker's mean--and his three quotes from Henniker, San Quintino, and Lebolo? It means for a surety only one thing: we now have evidence, for the first time, that actually links the name of Lebolo with what the Prophet Joseph Smith may have ultimately received. Were one or more of the four mummies the Prophet Joseph Smith received taken from the 1820 Lebolo find? No one knows. What is known is that San Quintino, who is personally supposed to have interviewed Lebolo, says that Lebolo claimed to have kept for himself one casket and mummy from the 1820 find. Another scholar, Englishman Warren R. Dawson, says that Lebolo "kept one for himself." Stricker says of this mummy: "She must have been the most beautiful of all and was anthropomorphic but she has, as far as I know, during the last hundred years never been mentioned by anyone as being exceptional." (Todd, p. 50.)

Did this one mummy end up in Joseph Smith's hands? Did more than one mummy from this 1820 find end up in the Prophet's hands? Did even unaccounted for mummies from the find end up in his hands? Or perhaps more likely, were

the Joseph Smith mummies found in the same Theban cemetery but on another day, another month, by Lebolo or someone else? Were some of the Joseph Smith mummies not associated with any of these finds, but from other locales, simply bunched in for package-merchandising? Is a combination of any of these possibilities likely? We simply do not know. But we now have renewed interest in Antonio Lebolo as a result of Dr. Nibley's evidence that two of the Prophet's Egyptian fragments are related to the family circle discovered by Lebolo in 1820. As a result of this, we have newly fostered interest in Lebolo. What manner of man was he? What are the basic facts surrounding him?

It should first be noted that for many years Latter-day Saints thought the name of the man was Antonio Sebolo--with an S instead of an L. This is because somehow in the printing of the History of the Church, published in 1904, the correct spelling given in Oliver Cowdery's original letter was misread--the L for an S, or a typesetting error and subsequent proofreading error occurred. Whatever it was, for fifty years the Church thought the man's name was Antonio Sebolo. Even today you still come across an occasional publication whose author doesn't know that Sebolo is Lebolo. Concerning the man himself, it is said by writers of the period and subsequent researchers that he was from Castellamonte, Italy, about twenty miles north of Turin, in the Piedmont section of Italy, that he was a former gendarme in Milan less than 100 miles east of Castellamonte, and that while in Egypt he was known as a scalawag--a cheat, briber, thief, ruffian, and even worse. Students of the subject have no difficulty in finding incidents of Lebolo's supposedly dishonest character. But in fairness, there is one story dealing with Lebolo wherein the author of the account says, "I am of the opinion that Mr. Lebolo is not guilty of any misdeeds, for when the Casciff was determined to beat the peasant (having to with the problem at hand) he (Lebolo) retired into a room saying that he would lose all of the antiquities of the world rather than see anyone beaten. . . ." (Todd, p. 25. Readers interested in further incidents demonstrating Lebolo's character are referred to Mayes, or Todd p. 16-25.) On this theme, perhaps the matter of Lebolo's character should charitably rest.

One final item. Latter-day Saints have tended to pronounce the name with the accent on the second syllable: Lebolo. The name, according to persons in Castellamonte, is pronounced Lebolo, and in fact is occasionally writted Le'bolo by Italians.

Before leaving the Chandler-Cowdery account, it will be helpful to briefly examine some other details of the account in order to see why we suspect the account does not contain the full story. Something is wrong, as the reader will soon see. (The reader may wish to quickly re-read the Oliver Cowdery account to review the details.) Now, item by item:

1. Oliver Cowdery is told that Lebolo is a French traveller. Research shows that he was Italian, born in Castellamonte.
2. Oliver Cowdery is told that Lebolo made his discovery in 1831. It presently looks impossible for Lebolo to have made a discovery in 1831. The most distinguished researcher of the period, Warren R. Dawson, says that Lebolo died in 1823. Dawson says that Lebolo was

in Egypt from 1817 until 1823.

3. Oliver Cowdery is told that Lebolo got his license from Mehemet Ali, then viceroy of Egypt. This may have been possible. Ali was the viceroy for several decades--covering all of the years in which we have interest.
- 4-5. Oliver Cowdery is told that Lebolo worked under Chevalier Drovetti in 1828. It is true that Lebolo worked under Drovetti, but probably not in 1828 if Lebolo dies in 1823.
6. Oliver Cowdery is told that in 1832 Lebolo sailed to Trieste and died there. Lebolo did die in Trieste, says Warren R. Dawson, but nine years earlier.
7. Oliver Cowdery is told that Lebolo wills "the whole" or eleven mummies to someone. The account of San Quintino, who supposedly visited Lebolo before his death, is not clear, but some students have felt that it indicated Lebolo had only the "one coffin" with him. Obviously, if this is so, Lebolo won't be able to will eleven mummies that he does not have to someone else. This item may prove out--but the Pearly P. Pratt, Nelson, and Lewis accounts all provide other alternatives. Score this item doubtful.
8. Oliver Cowdery is told that Michael H. Chandler is Lebolo's nephew. This is going to be a very fascinating story of how our Italian roughneck gendarme of the early nineteenth century is going to have an Irish relative. And although there is no evidence at the moment to disprove it, related information suggests that it is unlikely. Readers will recall that the Elder Pratt, Nelson, and Lewis accounts all provide other alternatives. Score this item doubtful.
9. Oliver Cowdery is told that the mummies go to Ireland, then to New York, and are claimed in 1833. Substantial research on this detail neither confirms nor denies the item.

So, of these nine selected major items upon which hang the tapestry of the Chandler-Cowdery story, three items check out as possible or harmonize with existing information, three items check out as impossible or are unable to be harmonized with existing information, and three items have neither been confirmed nor denied after extensive research on all three items. Obviously, using existing information, Michael Chandler's story just doesn't hold up in some details. And it is not Oliver Cowdery's fault. He states openly, "If I understand clearly," letting us know that he has been told these things by another. What we have here might be entitled "The Case of the Missing Benefactor," or "Will the Real Heir Please Stand Up." And this supposed Lebolo-Chandler blood relationship simply evades evidential support at the present time. As a possible future clue: Klaus Baer says that Chandler is "an antiquities dealer," and that his relationship with Lebolo may be that of a commercial relationship rather than a blood relationship (Todd, pp. 57-58.)

mummies that Chandler brought to Kirtland in 1835. Oh, that we had his report! What we do know is that toward the end of June, Michael H. Chandler came to Kirtland to exhibit some mummies, four human figures, together with some two more rolls of papyrus covered with hieroglyphic figures. In time he was brought to Joseph Smith, who shortly thereafter acquired the mummies. Why? I think the account by Elder Orson Pratt, although given years later, in 1878, provides the nearest thing that we have to an understanding of what really occurred that early July day when Michael Chandler met Joseph Smith.

Elder Pratt says:

But it so happened that in traveling through the country, he (Chandler) visited Kirtland, Ohio, where the Prophet Joseph Smith resided, bringing the mummies and the ancient papyrus writings with him. Mr. C. had also obtained from learned men the best translation he could of some few characters, which however, was not a translation, but more in the shape of their ideas with regard to it, their acquaintance with the language not being sufficient to enable them to translate it literally. After some conversation with the Prophet Joseph, Mr. Chandler presented to him the ancient characters, asking him if he could translate them. The prophet took them and repaired to his room and inquired of the Lord concerning them. The Lord told him they were sacred records. . . . And he also inquired of the Lord concerning some few characters which Mr. Chandler, gave him by way of a test, to see if he could translate them. The Prophet Joseph translated these characters and returned them with the translation to Mr. Chandler; and who, in comparing it with the translation of the same few characters by learned men, that he had before obtained, found the two to agree. (Journal of Discourses 20:64-65.)

I marvel within when I read this account. For me, it not only gets to the heart of the book of Abraham matter, it also gets to the heart of Joseph Smith. Simply put: the Prophet sees some interesting things. Maybe he is prompted by a warm resounding within his bosom, but he wants to know what they represent. He goes to the Lord. It was the Lord who told Joseph Smith that they represented sacred writings. It was the Lord who knew the kind of translation that ignorant scholars would have come up with, and it was the Lord who supplied Joseph Smith with whatever it was that Michael Chandler would have felt good about.

The Prophet inquired about purchasing the papyri, but Chandler said it could detract from his exhibit to only have the mummies, and so the Prophet, perhaps with the help of others who may have assisted in the form of a gift-offering, purchased the mummies and papyri for \$2,400.

#### During the Joseph Smith Period

Following the purchase of the mummies and the Egyptian literature--which is what Joseph Smith was primarily interested in--there follows an event-filled even-year period of Church history prior to the publication in March 1842 of the book of Abraham. The Prophet did not intend it that way, but events worked

ing entry is in the History of the Church: "The Church voted to sanction the appointment of Brother Phineas Richards and Reuben Hedlock, by the Presidency, to transact business for the Church in procuring means to translate and print the records taken from the Catacombs of Egypt, then in the Temple."

But the 1837 apostasy in Kirtland, the financial reversal in the community and nation, the disaffection of leading brethren in the Church--Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, David Whitmer and others--the threatening of the life of the Prophet by apostates, the closing out of the Kirtland period, and the expansion of the Missouri period all suggest to the student of Church history where the attention of the Prophet was for the next five years. And, amidst it all, in the Saints greatest hour of need, seemingly, the Lord inaugurated a great missionary movement by calling most of the members of the Council of the Twelve to England to preach the gospel. Latter-day Saints know what happened during these next years: Missouri trials and tribulations; the Prophet in Liberty Jail; the founding and establishing of Nauvoo, Illinois; the building again of a city of God; and the further establishment of the Church--its doctrines, principles, practices, and organization.

Little wonder it is that the Egyptian mummies and papyri take a back seat to myriads of other more pressing concerns, as well as myriads of other scriptural understandings and new information that the Prophet was constantly receiving and exuding to the Saints.

However, throughout this whole period, the Saints had access to the mummies and papyri. There was early established a pattern of exhibiting the Egyptian antiquities to all who wanted to see them. In fact, such a curiosity and attraction were the mummies and papyri that a numberless stream of saints and neighboring non-Mormons constantly poured in upon Joseph Smith while he was in Kirtland in order that they might see the strange sights. Records indicate that Frederick G. Williams and his son carted the mummies and papyri around the Kirtland countryside, from community to community, and others--took them to Hiram and nearby towns. However, after the Kirtland Temple was completed in 1836, the mummies were exhibited in the Temple for all who wished to visit. Later, when the Prophet left Kirtland and went to Missouri, his parents took care of the Egyptian mummies and papyri and brought them west to Illinois. While the Prophet was languishing in Liberty Jail, his parents stayed the winter of 1838-39 in Quincy, Illinois, and openly exhibited the Egyptian items to the populace there. Once Nauvoo was established, the pattern was the same. Depending upon the living quarters, and exhibiting quarters, that were available, the Egyptian antiquities were exhibited in the Prophet's or his mother's home. Many are the accounts of persons who saw the mummies and papyri during this Nauvoo period. Particularly were they exhibited by the Prophet's mother as a "curiosity" to which tourists might pay a few coins to see, which money helped support the Prophet's mother.

But by February 1842 the Prophet was again turning his attention to the subject of Abraham. Three brief quotes by leading brethren of the day, although confusing in their terminology, suggest a clear picture:

Brigham Young--"I met with the Twelve at Brother Joseph's. He conversed

with us in a familiar manner on a variety of subjects, and explained to us the Urim and Thummim which he found with the plates, called in the Book of Mormon the Interpreters. . . .He showed us his seer stone." (Brigham Young Journal, December 27, 1841.)

Wilford Woodruff--"The Lord is blessing Joseph with power to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of God; to translate through the Urim and Thummim ancient records. . . .old Abraham. . . .which caused our hearts to burn within us while we behold their glorious truths opened unto us. Joseph the Seer has presented us some of the Book of Abraham. . . ." (Wilford Woodruff Journal February 19, 1842.)

Parley P. Pratt four months later wrote in the Millennial Star--"The record is now in course of translation by means of the Urim and Thummim. . . ."

Students of church history feel that these brethren probably confused their terminology. The intent of their comments, as Brigham Young accurately observed, was to show that the Prophet was receiving divine understanding through the seer stone in his calling as Prophet, Seer, and Revelator. As President Joseph Fielding Smith has written:

We have been taught since the days of the Prophet that the Urim and Thummim were returned with the plates to the angel. We have no record of the Prophet having the Urim and Thummim after the organization of the Church. Statements of translation by the Urim and Thummim after that date are evidently errors. . . .The Urim and Thummim so spoken of, however, was the seer stone which was in the possession of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the early days." (Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, 3:225-26.)

The very important point of all this is to clearly show that the book of Abraham is coming from the Lord. Whatever the papyri may have had on them, whatever illustrations on them given to depict accounts that perhaps were being relayed in a degenerate, poorly written version--whatever it is that the scrolls may have had on them, including a version of temple endowments (see Nibley, The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri), they probably did not reflect the teaching or subject in as full and accurate manner as the Lord would have desired. As Warren Parrish noted in Kirtland and as Wilford Woodruff and Parley P. Pratt later noted, the Prophet Joseph Smith received his scripture and understandings from the Lord.

Seven years after the papyri came to Kirtland and seven years after Joseph's mind was turned to the things of Abraham as a result of seeing Facsimile Nos. 1, 2, and 3, the Prophet published what we call the book of Abraham. It was first published in the Times and Seasons in Nauvoo in two installments, on March 1 and March 15, 1842. The first installment consisted of Facsimile No. 1 and the text from chapter 1 to chapter 2:18. The second installment consisted of the remainder of the book except for Facsimile No. 3 on May 16, 1842.

Two interesting footnotes: Latter-day Saints will be interested to know that three prominent American newspapers regarded the publication of the book of Abraham as a major occurrence: The New York Herald, under James Gordon

Bennett, devoted a good portion of its editorial page to the Prophet and the book of Abraham in the Sunday, April 3, 1842, issue. Bennett even reprinted Facsimile No. 1 and the first installment, complete to chapter 2:18! The treatment was respectful and complimentary. Three days later, William Bartlett, editor of the Boston Daily Ledger, apparently recognizing the public interest in things Egyptian or things Mormon, announced that he too would publish the Prophet's translation. But he did better than Bennett. He front-paged the facsimile and the translation in his April 7 issue! He did the same for his Dollar Weekly Bostonian. The response stimulates wonder and amusement. Aside from the curiosity and public interest in things Egyptian, I suspect the Colonies just couldn't risk the possibility that Joseph Smith really could translate--and wouldn't it turn out to be a great step in establishing themselves as advanced as Europe! Such presumed subliminal psychological motivations, of course, are only fanciful. But what missionaries wouldn't give today for similar treatment.

The second footnote of real interest to Latter-day Saints is an article by John Taylor in the February 1843 Times and Seasons, wherein he says:

We would respectfully announce to those of our subscribers (and there are a good many of them), who commenced their subscription for the Times and Seasons at the time when Brother Joseph took the editorial department that the term for which they subscribed is nearly at a close; most of those commenced at the seventh and eighth numbers; at the time when the translations from the Book of Abraham commenced. This is the sixth number, which leaves only four weeks until the time that they subscribed for, will be fulfilled.

We have given this timely notice that our friends may prepare themselves. We would further state that we have the promise of Br. Joseph, to furnish us with further extracts from the Book of Abraham.

As all Latter-day Saints know, the further extracts never came forth, and persons familiar with the Prophet's last 14 years will readily understand the reasons for his inability to complete the task. But there was more than the Prophet was ready to give us. Unfortunately, Carthage denied us many things.

#### After the Prophet's Death: Selling of the Artifacts

After the martyrdom, the Prophet's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, had ownership of the mummies and papyri and continued to exhibit them to help bring in support money. Due to the mob actions against the Nauvoo Saints, Mother Smith moved several times--to Knoxville, Webster, and Fountain Green--all in Illinois, but returned to Nauvoo and lived the remaining several years of her life with the Prophet's widow, Emma Smith Bidamon, until her own death on May 5, 1855. Mother Smith had stayed in the Midwest to look after Emma and her children, one of whom went west with the Saints. Following her death, the mummies and papyri went to Emma Smith, who held them a little over a year before selling them to a Mr. A. Combs, probably at the encouragement of her second husband,

Major L.C. Bidamon.

Before describing the final chapter in this long odyssey of the traveling mummies and papyri, a very important consideration presents itself. If the papyri were not important enough for the Council of the Twelve to insist upon obtaining for their transferal across the plains, one wonders about their actual intrinsic significance. As has been shown, those close to the Prophet in the production of the book of Abraham have already commented about the Prophet turning to the Lord through the seer stone. Was the papyri story only a much-corrupted version of what had originally been written by Abraham--and thus, for his purpose, the Prophet could not use what may have been a papyrus rewrite (a rewrite of a rewrite, etc.)? For me, this picture harmonizes with what we know about what the Prophet had, and with what the recently discovered papyri fragments represent. To put this in further perspective, think how absolutely untenable it would have been to have left the Gold Plates in Nauvoo, had the Church had them. Such actual records, giving rise to a major new scripture, would have been regarded as the most important physical treasure of the Church and seemingly, under no conditions would they have been left in Illinois for any purpose. For me, similar reasoning applies to the papyri. Fascinated as the Prophet was by them, intrigued as he was by languages, those close to him knew the source whence came the book of Abraham and apparently were not overly impressed with the Egyptian papyri themselves. Thus, the leaders of the Church could in good conscience leave the mummies and papyri to the care and keeping of Mother Smith, hoping the curiosities would bring a few visitors who would reimburse her accordingly.

Perhaps in a somewhat similar spirit, Emma Smith could also sell the Egyptian antiquities. And so, moving to the final chapters in this story, when the eleven fragments were discovered in the Metropolitan Museum of art in 1966, with the following note of sale. The note sounds to me as if it were written for signature by Emma's husband, L.C. Bidamon:

Nauvoo City May 25/26

This certifies that we have sold to; Mr. A. Combs four Egyptian Mummies with the records of them These Mummies were obtained from the catacombs of Egypt sixty feet below the surface of the Earth, by the antiquarian society of Paris & forwarded to New York & purchased by the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith at the price of twenty four hundred dollars in the year Eighteen hundred thirty five they were highly prized by Mr Smith on account of the importance which attached to the record which were accidentally found enclosed in the breast of one of the Mummies. from translations by Mr Smith of the Records these Mummies were found to be the family of Pharo King of Egypt. they were kept exclusively by Mr Smith until his death & since by the Mother of Mr Smith notwithstanding we have had repeated offers to purchase which have invariable been refused until her death which occurred on the fourteenth of this month.

Nauvoo



Hancock Co. Ill May 26

(Signed)  
 L. C. Bidamon  
 Emma Bidamon former wife of Jos. Smith  
 Joseph Smith son of Jos. Smith

Within weeks or a few months, A. Combs had sold two of the mummies and some papyri to Mr. Edward Wyman, owner of Wyman's Hall or museum in St. Louis. By fall, the 1856 catalog carried the blurb:

These mummies were obtained from the catacombs of Egypt, sixty feet below the surface of the earth, for the Antiquarian Society of Paris, forwarded to New York, and there purchased, in the year 1835, by Joe Smith, the Mormon Prophet. . . . The body of one is that of a female, about forty--the other, that of a boy, about fourteen. They were kept by the Prophet's mother until her death, when the heirs sold them, and shortly thereafter were purchased for the Museum.

Some papyri is also described.

In 1863, the entire holding of the St. Louis Wyman's Hall were sold to the Chicago Museum--and with the holdings went Mormon mummies, papyri, St. Louis curator and all. There the two mummies and the portion of papyri acquired by Edward Wyman were exhibited until 1871. During that time, the Chicago Museum was sold to a Colonel John H. Wood, and the museum moved several times to different quarters within the city. The two mummies and papyri continued to be one of the many attractions in the museum until the Great Chicago Fire started on October 8, 1871, in a barn belonging to Patrick O'Leary, and, legend persisting, the fire apparently began because a cow kicked a lantern over and ignited nearby straw. It is said that of a population of 77,000, all but 7,000 were left homeless. The fire swept the city, leaving an estimated loss of \$187,000--and with it went whatever mummies and papyri that were in the museum.

For the next ninety-six years, it was generally thought by the membership of the Church that all of the mummies and all of the papyri had burned in the Chicago fire. But the 1967 announcement of the Church acquisition of eleven fragments of papyri changed all of that. Some scholars, principally Dr. James R. Clark of Brigham Young University, had begun to trace the mummies and papyri after they left Mother Smith and saw evidence that only a portion of the mummies and papyri had reached the Chicago Museum in the first place. So the 1967 announcement of eleven fragments of papyri being acquired by the Church firmly settled what had only been suspicioned--two mummies and who knows how much papyri are probably still in existence somewhere, their former history and records of acquisitions perhaps lost or unknown to present holders, or the items themselves perhaps long-since relegated to storage rooms.

In fact, it was in just such a setting that the eleven fragments now owned by the Church came to light. The story begins in early spring of 1966, when Dr. Aziz S. Atiya of the University of Utah's Middle East Center and an internationally-recognized historian of the Middle East was in the Metropolitan

Museum of Art "looking for documents, papyri, pictures, and illustrations to serve the book" he was writing.

While I was in one of the dim rooms where everything was brought to me, something caught my eye, and I asked one of the assistants to take me behind the bars into the storehouse of documents so that I could look some more. While there I found a file with these documents. I at once recognized the picture part of it. When I saw this picture, I knew that it had appeared in the Pearl of Great Price. . . . Now when I saw this, I began to search further. I saw more pieces of (Joseph Smith) papyri stacked together. . . . Another document was found with these documents, signed by Joseph Smith's wife, his son, and someone else. . . . (Todd, pp. 333-34.)

After a year and a half of negotiations, the eleven fragments were acquired by the Church on November 27, 1967, in New York. President N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency received the fragments for the Church.

How is it that these fragments came to be in the Metropolitan Museum of Art? According to the Museum's information, Mr. A. Combs apparently left some papyri to a much thought-of housekeeper, of unknown name.

This housekeeper, at her death, left the papyri to her daughter. The daughter, her married name Alice C. Heusser, came in 1918 to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, probably seeking to determine the value of her papyri. She did not sell the papyri in 1918. But by 1947, her widowed husband, Edward Heusser, perhaps felt that the papyri had sat around long enough without paying for themselves, and in 1947 he sold the eleven fragments to the Metropolitan Museum of Art--twenty-nine years after the Museum first learned of them and twenty more years before the general membership of the Church learned of their existence.

Following this announcement, the Church Historian's Office informed the First Presidency that one small papyrus fragment (actually consisting of several smaller fragments pasted to a firmer backing) was in the Historian's Office, and it soon joined the other eleven fragments. This twelfth piece apparently was part of the inventory of Church property delivered to Newell K. Whitney in March 1847, and subsequently brought across the plains to remain in the Church Historian's Office until someone found it of interest.

This, then, is their long and fascinating odyssey--and one that surely is not over. What did A. Combs do with the other two mummies?--and the rest of the papyri? Time and research may surely tell. But although the outline on which to place the background mosaic of the story of the book of Abraham is fragmentary in places, let me clearly and unequivocally underscore the fact that as an article of personal faith I know that the book of Abraham is scripture to our dispensation. I know through the Spirit that it came through a prophet of God. I know that it is an important document theologically, and that it teaches great truths that broaden my soul, warm my heart, and bring me closer to the Lord. No amount of unfilled patches in the texture of the background story can alter those feelings and that deep personal conviction. It is a joy to try to find out more about how we received the papyri simply because those Egyptian hieroglyphics provided to the

Prophet Joseph Smith the opportunity to turn to the Lord to receive what Abraham really wrote.

Now, hopefully intrigued by an absorbing and complex background story, let us resolve to turn next to that small volume of scripture, most appropriately entitled the Pearl of Great Price, and read one of the most beautiful stories ever revealed to man.

Lest one be unfamiliar with the story, it is set in the ages of the past, and enchantingly, its first words begin: "In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my father, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence; and, finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers. . . ."

May we seek those blessings also.