

MORMON SCRIPTURE

The Pearl of Great Price, Part III

By Marvin W. Cowan

Mormonism claims that the *Pearl of Great Price* contains the writings of Moses and Abraham which clarify and amplify their records in the Book of Genesis in the *Bible*. But, the Book of Moses in the *Pearl of Great Price* was a “revelation” to Mormonism’s founder, Joseph Smith, so there is no original document written by Moses to support the LDS claim. There isn’t even *one copy* of the *Pearl of Great Price* Book of Moses in any ancient language. In fact, the earliest copy of the Book of Moses that exists came from Joseph Smith and since that was a “revelation,” there is no way to prove that Smith even recorded it accurately. The introduction to the *Pearl of Great Price* plainly says the Book of Moses has been changed, so the current edition is obviously not exactly what Smith said was revealed to him. These things raise serious doubts about how much clarity the Book of Moses can add to the Genesis account. There are thousands of ancient copies of the Bible in the original languages, but Mormonism questions its reliability because the author’s original documents have not been found or identified. But, when someone questions Mormonism’s scriptures because they have no original documents by the authors and not even *one copy* in the original language, Mormons accuse them of being “anti-Mormons” who are persecuting the LDS Church! The more that Mormons claim to be Christians, the more this inconsistency will cause them problems.

The Book of Abraham in the *Pearl of Great Price* has even more problems for Mormons than the Book of Moses. However, the problems in the Book of Abraham exist not because there are *no* original documents for it, but because there *are* original documents that can be checked! Joseph Smith claimed that he translated the Book of Abraham from some papyri containing ancient Egyptian writings that the LDS Church purchased from Michael H. Chandler who had them on display in Kirtland, OH where Smith was living in 1835. At that time very little was known about ancient Egyptian writings, so many people were impressed when Smith claimed that he could translate the writings on the papyri. His “translation” first appeared in series of articles in the Mormon publication *Times and Seasons* beginning March 1, 1842. Then it was published as a pamphlet entitled *The Pearl of Great Price* in 1851 and another edited version in 1878. And at the October 1880 Semi-Annual LDS Conference it was unanimously canonized as scripture. LDS Apostle, Bruce R. McConkie wrote that the Book of Abraham was written by Abraham and “contains priceless information about the gospel, pre-existence, the nature of Deity, the creation, the priesthood, information which is not otherwise available in any other revelation now extant” (*Mormon Doctrine*, p. 564). When the Book of Abraham was first published in 1842, Smith was already teaching the new doctrines that appeared in his “translation,” so it helped to convince his followers that he was teaching ancient doctrines that had been lost.

But, between the time that Smith “translated” the Book of Abraham and the time it was canonized, scholars had studied the Rosetta Stone and learned to read ancient Egyptian writings. That made it possible for them to determine if Smith’s translation was reliable. In 1856 a French Egyptologist by the name of Deveria studied Smith’s facsimiles of the Egyptian papyri in the Book of Abraham along with his interpretation and concluded that Smith’s interpretation had nothing to do with the Egyptian writings. He said the facsimiles were

copies of common funerary documents buried with the dead. Since his study was published in French, it was ignored by the Mormon Church. Then in 1873 T. B. H. Stenhouse published *The Rocky Mountain Saints: A Full and Complete History of the Mormons* in which included an English translation of Deveria's study. In 1879 George Reynolds, President of the LDS Council of Seventy responded by claiming that the Egyptian words had two or more meanings, one for the masses and one for those in the priesthood that could understand hidden things. Many Mormons still use that argument. But, do English, French, or German words have one meaning for the masses and another hidden meaning for those who are more spiritual? Most people would consider such a concept absurd! In 1912 the Rt. Rev. Franklin S. Spaulding, Episcopal Bishop of Utah, sent copies of the three Egyptian facsimiles in the Book of Abraham to some of the leading Egyptologists in the world asking for their view of Smith's interpretations. Eight responded saying that Smith's interpretations showed that he knew nothing about the Egyptian language.

Having seen nothing more recent than Spaulding's 1912 report, in 1966 I sent copies of the same three facsimiles in the Book of Abraham to Dr. John Wilson at Chicago University and Dr. Richard Parker of Brown University who were well known Egyptologists. I asked if the facsimiles were genuine Egyptian, and if they would comment on Joseph Smith's interpretation of them. Both said they were poor copies of common Egyptian funerary documents that were buried with the dead and that Smith's interpretation had nothing to do with the Egyptian writings on the papyri. Then on November 27, 1967 the front page of the LDS owned *Deseret News* was covered with photocopies of Egyptian papyri recently found in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. The newspaper reported that the papyri were the ones Joseph Smith had purchased from Michael Chandler in 1835, which included the one from which he translated the Book of Abraham. I sent photocopies of those papyri to the same two Egyptologists I had contacted before and ask if the original papyri made any difference in their view of Smith's interpretation. Both wrote that the papyri were genuine Egyptian funerary documents, and not poor copies like the ones in the Book of Abraham I had previously sent to them. But they also said that Smith's interpretation did not come from the papyri. Numerous Egyptologists have agreed with that conclusion while not one has agreed with Smith's interpretation. That shouldn't give Mormons much confidence that Smith's translation of the nonexistent gold plates into the *Book of Mormon* from the nonexistent "Reformed Egyptian" language is any better than his translation of the Book of Abraham.

Our next article will discuss some of the other contents of the *Pearl of Great Price*. For more information on this subject we suggest *By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus*, by Charles M. Larson, published by The Institute for Religious Research, Grand Rapids, MI, Revised in 1992.