

Joseph Smith's Contributions to Egyptology

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Joseph Smith as Translator

It has been known for many years that Joseph Smith translated hieroglyphics and even the ancient Hebrew language differently from secular scholars. Joseph Smith's Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar remains an enigma that neither LDS scholars nor critics have been able to decipher. Much has been written on the topic while shedding little light. Critics have pointed out that Joseph Smith's translations do not correspond to those of modern Egyptologists, but have erroneously concluded that Joseph Smith therefore could not translate and that the Book of Abraham is a hoax. Some critics have claimed that the Book of Abraham represents the most compelling evidence against the LDS Church. LDS scholars and apologists have likewise been unable to reconcile Joseph Smith's translations with their understanding of the Egyptian language, ultimately concluding that either we do not have the documents from which the translation was made, or that the Book of Abraham was given purely by revelation without any actual translation occurring.

I am sure I must sound critical of scholars at times. I would like to say in their defense that after examining the foundations of Egyptology and Sumerology, I do not wonder that they are confused. The wonder is that they do as well as they do with what they have to work with and what has been handed down to them. As Prof. Cyrus Gordon said, independent thought is not encouraged, to put it mildly. In a field where credentials are everything, we should review the definition of credentials: the measure of your ability and willingness to demonstrate strict conformity to what is commonly believed by those already in the field.

I have heard some things about the so-called "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language" purportedly dictated by Joseph Smith to several scribes. I have yet to hear an unambiguous statement about it that is correct. Once while doing research in the open stacks of the Egyptology section in the Brigham Young University Library, I came across some penciled notes in the margin of a book. Someone was making a serious effort to reconcile the hieroglyphs in the Joseph Smith Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language [JS GAEL] with conventional Egyptology. I have had my own copy of that manuscript for over forty years, and I have known all that time that it can not be done. Nevertheless, I wondered who was intelligent enough to make such an attempt? Then I recognized the handwriting. Hugh Nibley. It became apparent that he was doing the research for his book, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*. One thing is true, and Nibley figured it out: The JS GAEL can not be reconciled with conventional Egyptology. Obviously the sen-sen papyrus was not the source of the Book of Abraham. This was the thesis of Nibley's book, and that ought to have put an end to the questions of Joseph Smith as a translator. There is no way that the JS GAEL makes sense on the foundation of Egyptology, the foundation our scholars have built upon since Champollion's book

became accepted around 1867. Nibley very ably proved it many times over using the conventional tools of the conventional Egyptologist.

Why, then, could not the critics accept the verdict of one who was universally regarded as the best scholar in such matters? There are three possible explanations. 1. Either they never bothered to examine Nibley's airtight case, in which event they deserve no further audience; or, 2. They are not willing to admit the truth, in which case they deserve no further audience; or, 3. Nagging doubts about the triumph of conventional, historical scholarship over seership would not let their already tormented conscience rest: a faintly absurd suspicion that seers just might exist, and that historical, conventional scholarship just might be wrong. I care not for their mental collision with rationality; let their psychiatrists sort it out and prescribe whatever medication may seem most promising. The fact of the matter is this: The Joseph Smith Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language is absolutely correct insofar as it is transcribed correctly [it abounds in scribal errors, even to the point of having whole pages of pure gibberish]. I have proven it many times over in these installments, and will yet prove it many times over again. The JS GAEL was dictated by Joseph to several scribes, who can be distinguished by their handwriting.




Lest the conventional Egyptologist be under-esteemed on this or any other count, let me rush to his defense with this observation: It is entirely excusable that any and all Egyptologists should dismiss the JS GAEL out of hand. It is entirely out of step with what they have been taught. Even more seriously, it is extremely difficult to understand. I have never met or heard of anybody who has been able to make any sense of it. Even the great Hugh Nibley - and he was great in every sense of the word - could not make heads or tails of it, and concluded that it could not be done. It deals in concepts which are not even considered the province of graphic communication - a sort of lexical matrix algebra, to cite just one principle.



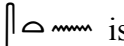
The JS GAEL is not complete. It can not be used as a stand alone tool to translate anything. Nor could it be expected of Joseph Smith to prepare a set of directions so complete that it could stand alone and enlighten us in all the dark corridors of a labyrinthine field if we ourselves bring nothing to the table, no, not even a little candle. Remember Oliver Cowdery's failure, even having the Urim and Thummim: "You took no thought, save it were to ask." Joseph's time was too precious to operate a mental fast-food handout for the careless traveler. What he did was to show us where we might find ore, that we might make tools, to build a craft to navigate waters too deep for human intelligence to cross unaided.

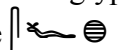
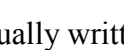
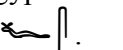
If we spend a lifetime gaining the knowledge and intelligence to translate all of the world's major languages that it requires in commerce, industry, and national security, to its complete satisfaction, and then master the conventional fields of ancient languages, and listen to the promptings of the Holy Ghost and take everything Joseph said seriously, as well as "living by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God," from all of His anointed ones, past and present, then, and only then, can we aspire to wrestle with the problems posed by our ancestral civilization and begin to comprehend that what Joseph


Smith provided are nothing more or less than the missing links in a very long and complex chain.

Having said all that, I can now say that I can prove everything in the JS GAEL to be correct, with the exceptions and exemptions already mentioned. I can show you where wrong turns were made by Egyptologists, and where we need to go back and make course corrections. I have already cited examples, mostly from my own discoveries, but also occasionally citing from the JS GAEL.

From my own discoveries, let me cite this example: Champollion states [op. cit.] that the hieroglyphs  should be translated as the Egyptian god SET, the bad guy among the gods. Why is the third hieroglyph ignored? Because he can't find an analog in Coptic? I look at this and say, no. This is SATAN. The final hieroglyph  is said by some to represent a pool of water; by others, a rock. It is a rock, and its sound is N. It is the Egyptian hieroglyph equivalent to the Sumerian character  which is normally pronounced NA but in this case it is a final syllable inversion such as we see with AYIN, GN at the beginning of a syllable, NG at the end.

If you still don't believe me, the alternate writing of this individual is . Any Egyptologist will tell you that  is always pronounced N. Why, then, do they ignore it in this case?  is SATAN.

The JS GAEL claims that the Egyptian word for "seven" is pronounced "PSA." But all Egyptologists in the world will tell you that it is pronounced SEFEKH. Shall we go back to the original hieroglyphs and see for ourselves? The Egyptian hieroglyphs for "seven" spelled out are  but usually written  or .

There is no F in early Egyptian, nor in any other contemporary ancient language. F is a relatively recent invention. In the old languages there is only hard and soft P, i.e. P and PH. That's why none of the words we borrow from Greek have any Fs in them. F was at its birth christened digamma, because it was gamma with an extra member. When I put an F in the hieroglyphic character chart (<http://72languages.com/hieroglyphic.html>), I was just accommodating the Egyptologists, because that is what they are used to seeing. Anciently - and this includes all of the earliest languages - P and PH were the same character and you had to know from context which sound to use. The correct pronunciation of the word "seven" in Egyptian hieroglyphs is PSA. You can write it PSAH if it makes you feel better to accommodate the  that is sometimes there. And so it is with everything else in the JS GAEL. It is a correct document, and I can prove every correctly transcribed word of it.

My interest, however, is not in proving anything to anybody. I want to find out things, and I am willing to share what I find. I am not interested in spending any more time than I have to, in looking up things that everybody knows, or in proving to somebody else what I already know perfectly well to be so. Perhaps after we get through translating all

the ancient records, I can make a correct and fully explained version of the JS GAEL. If anybody cares. It will not enable you to translate anything as it stands, as I said, but I could fix that.

I should tell you something else about the JS GAEL. For over a hundred and seventy years, scholars have been barking up the wrong tree. They have said, “Joseph Smith can not translate Egyptian hieroglyphs because he does not do it the way we do.” It never occurred to them that they might be wrong and he might be right. And it never will. So let’s bark up a different tree and see what we find.

I would be happy to go through every point of the JS GAEL and prove that it is correct. But why should I? It would not tell me anything I do not already know, nor provide scholars with anything they are willing to accept. The old Egyptian hieratic characters, for example, are not stock characters you can put in a font. I have such fonts, but they are useless for old Egyptian hieratic. Why? Because originally the characters were custom synthesized, made to order for a given purpose, just as we assemble words from letters. Joseph Smith also translated a lot of hieroglyphs, but that would yield the same result. I would claim it means one thing and scholars would not accept it, and neither of us would be profited.

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers

Scholars’ inability to decipher the Kirtland Egyptian papers reflects several factors. First, they map the sounds and meanings of impoverished Ptolemaic Egyptian onto the much richer Egyptian language of nearly two thousand years earlier. This is a start, but this does not reflect how sounds and meanings have changed over time. Early Egyptian was a richer and more descriptive language that towered over late the Ptolemaic and Coptic language, just as the early pyramids provide a window into a more advanced civilization of which little evidence can be found in the architecture of the Ptolemaic era.

Second, Joseph Smith’s translations have been largely ignored even within the LDS scholarly community. When I was a student at Brigham Young University, after checking all the Hebrew grammars in the library in seven different languages and going back to the 1500s, I asked my instructor, one professor of classical Hebrew, why Joseph Smith translated the Hebrew one way, while Gesenius, a prominent Hebrew scholar, translated it another. His reply was: “follow Gesenius.” There has been little effort by LDS scholars to evaluate why Joseph Smith translated Hebrew different from modern scholars, let alone to understand the logic and implications. I chose to follow Joseph Smith, trying to understand why he translated as he did rather than writing him off as an “ignorant farmboy.”

Third, none of the scholars has met even the partial prerequisite of knowledge of the seventy languages that is necessary to restore knowledge of the original language. In their earliest forms, cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphic, Egyptian hieratic, and simplified Phoenician hieroglyphs are all the same language.

Joseph Smith's Kirtland Egyptian Papers present keys to understanding the earliest form of Egyptian and the original language. No language can be deciphered without a key. Joseph Smith never intended the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar to represent a complete, stand-alone work. Most of the papers were written in 1835, and few were written after 1836. Joseph felt that the task was important and devoted a considerable amount of time to the project (History of the Church 2:238). He never completed the project, realizing that his examples had provided enough keys for one with knowledge of the seventy languages to decipher his translation process.

A Few Principles from the Kirtland Egyptian Papers

Here are a few examples of important principles and data derived from Joseph Smith's Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language and Kirtland Egyptian Papers are listed below. This list is by no means comprehensive, but can serve to provide the reader with some idea of the value of this work. As I noted above, I can prove that every character in the GAEL that is correctly transcribed is correct.

- In the original language and its immediate descendants (the earliest forms of hieroglyphic, hieratic, Phoenician, and cuneiform), characters have a matrix of sounds and meanings divided into five degrees.
- When characters are fully broken out and read iteratively through all five degrees, a large amount of English text can be derived from a very small amount of hieratic writing.
- Systematic logic of the early language. The degree a character should be read in depends on grammatical rules and context (i.e. p.2 "when this character has a horizontal line under it it reduces it into the fourth degree...when it has two horizontal lines, it is reduced to the third degree...and when it has three horizontal lines, it is reduced into the second degree.") Also, increasing the degree of a number multiplies it by five. Similar systematic using lines above, below, or to the right or left of a character to change sound, degree, or numerical value can be identified in cuneiform writings systems and are preserved in Roman numerals.
- Vowel shift by degree (ka, ke, ki, ko, ku)
- Early hieratic characters were custom composed to reflect the desired meaning. Hieratic characters required specialized training to read, which is why only priests could read the writing in early times. Knowledge of this process was completely lost in later times. I will provide examples of the logic of hieratic character composition in later installments.
- Joseph Smith correctly transliterates and divides words and names by their syllables. Knowing where to divide a word is essential to deriving a correct etymology. For instance, the name Abraham is mistranslated by all scholars because they break the word down incorrectly. Joseph Smith provides the correct transliteration: AH BRAH OAM, which can then be broken out into characters and meanings in the original language (see <http://www.72languages.com/originallanguage.html>).
- Joseph Smith provides correct translations. For instance, his translation of Pharoah ("PHA RA OAH" by syllables) as "king by royal blood" ([Abraham 1:20](#)) provides a link to identify the true etymology and discredit the false etymology of "Pharoah" that Egyptologists have erroneously mapped onto "PER AA," which actually refers to the Pharoah's estate (see <http://www.72languages.com/hieroglyphic.html> under "Pharoah.")

- The original derivation of some characters. For example, the hieroglyph from which the Greek Φ was derived represented an eclipse with the moon passing between the earth and sun.
- Where does the Roman numeral V for 5 come from? No one knows, and the word is not Latin. It comes from the original language word for five, Veh.
- The concept of cubit measurement of time (see <http://www.72languages.com/hieroglyphic.html> under “Pyramids.”)

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers are enigmatic to the casual scholar who dabbles in Ptolemaic Egyptian and late square Hebrew. However, they have provided me with vital information for restoring the early language. Specific principles can be derived from these papers which consistently produce more meaningful and accurate translations. However, the KEP do not provide a complete chain for restoring the original language – only some vital missing links that require knowledge of many languages to decipher and contextualize.

As a professional translator of 72 ancient and modern languages since 1969, I find time and again that careful study vindicates Joseph Smith, not merely as a prophet receiving abstract visions unrelated to ancient texts, but as an inspired translator who understood ancient languages with a degree of accuracy and understanding not possessed by any Egyptologist or Sumerologist on the planet. Joseph Smith’s writings – from Book of Mormon names like “Nephi,” “Liahona,” and “Irreantum” to the text of the Book of Abraham – provide evidence beyond any possible doubt of the authenticity of his prophetic mission as they include vast and linguistically documentable intelligence which Joseph could not possibly have known on his own or fabricated. His writings demonstrate that his Egyptian translations demanded intense intellectual effort and were not simply handed to him on a platter. I can document time after time that Joseph Smith’s translations are correct while those of worldly scholars are wrong. The scriptural prophesy of Joseph stands: “Then shall the Lord God say unto him: The learned shall not read them, for they have rejected them, and I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee” ([2 Nephi 27:20](#)).