

“THE WORK OF TRANSLATING”

The Book of Abraham’s Translation Chronology¹

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One of Joseph Smith’s great gifts was translation. While millions have benefitted from his translation efforts, we understand very little of the process. This is particularly true of the Book of Abraham. Here we will investigate how much of the Book of Abraham was translated in Kirtland and how much in Nauvoo. Understanding this chronology will allow us to better perceive doctrinal developments within the Church and to more fully understand Joseph Smith’s revelatory process.

We wish to note at the outset that we have not been able to reach a firm conclusion about this chronology. There are scholars who feel strongly about various possible timelines, and initially we were among these. We expected that the evidence would allow us to make a firm conclusion. Yet, as we followed the evidence, it became clear that the evidence is ambiguous. It may be stronger for one theory than others, but not enough to end debate. Therefore, we do not take a stand that is stronger than the evidence allows, but rather acknowledge that sometimes historical information forces us to live with a degree of ambiguity.

EVIDENCE	SUGGESTS	STRENGTH OF SUGGESTION BASED ON THIS EVIDENCE
Abraham 3 contains Hebrew phrases influenced by the 1836 study of Hebrew.	Abraham 3 was translated after 1835, which means it was translated in 1842.	Weak
Phrases influenced by the Prophet's study of Hebrew are thoroughly interwoven in Abraham 4 and 5.	Abraham 4 and 5 were translated in 1842.	Strong
The translation of "Elohim" as "gods" seems to rely on an already formed idea that there was a plurality of gods.	Joseph Smith had already translated Abraham 4 (and probably 5) by the end of 1835.	Fairly strong

At this point, there is no theory that accounts for all of the evidence. Clearly, either we need to find more evidence or create another model. Such is not surprising when dealing with a process so heavily influenced by the Divine and so scattered or absent in the historical record. For the time being, the most we can do is say that it seems likely Joseph Smith translated all of the text of the Book of Abraham we now have, and perhaps even more, by 1835. While such a theory is plausible, it remains problematic because it is simultaneously incomplete *and* the most probable of the theories proposed thus far.

NOTES

Editorial note from Kerry Muhlestein: Professor Robert Millet has had a profound impact on thousands, including me. He inspired me to work towards my current profession and has served as a model to which I aspire as a religious educator. His wisdom and foresight have helped chart the