

# Joseph Smith, Translator of the Book of Abraham.

*By Isaac Ball.*

Joseph Smith is the greatest teacher of truth Jesus ever sent to earth. In fourteen years of ministry he enunciated so many vital new truths as to flood the realm of spiritual knowledge with light in every corner, as the sun floods the earth with its beams. He re-established the science of theology.

And, since theology is the science which includes all other sciences, we are not surprised to find Joseph Smith teaching principles some of which fall within the category of almost every science known to man. Hence such subjects as "Joseph Smith, the Prophet-Scientist" offer mines of truth to be uncovered. That the Prophet was in advance of scientific men in giving to the world many fundamental truths of physics, geology and chemistry has been clearly shown by B. H. Roberts in his work entitled, "Joseph Smith, the Prophet-Teacher."

One of the important services Joseph rendered mankind was the translation of the Pearl of Great Price and other writings. Very ancient writings of the fathers are here rendered to us free from omissions or additions. Of the two chief parts of the Pearl of Great Price, the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham, we shall make a few observations in regard to the latter.

The Book of Abraham is unique in value mainly for two reasons: first, in the principles taught in the book, and, secondly, in the manner of its coming forth and the method of translation.

For the sake of order in treat-

ment, we shall first take up some of the principles taught in the Book of Abraham, and after that how it came forth, and the method of translation.

Before beginning, however, let us state again what the Book is which we are to consider. The Pearl of Great Price is headed thus:

"The Book of Abraham. Translated from the Papyrus by Joseph Smith. A Translation of some Ancient Records, that have fallen into our hands from the Catacombs of Egypt, the Writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon Papyrus."

For the most part the twenty-one pages of the Book of Abraham (for it is not extensive) recounts a vision and personal appearance of Jehovah to Abraham. This vision is divisible into two parts. In the first part, Abraham is shown the whole extent and magnitude of God's creations. This includes a view of Kolob, together with the other great governing bodies in their gradations away from Kolob even down to our sun, earth, and moon.

In the second part of the vision, Abraham is informed regarding the creation of the earth by the Gods, in the seven grand periods of creation. Here two truths new to this age are introduced. One is the plurality of Gods, the second is the indefinite duration of the periods of creation.

Let us go back to that part of the

vision in which a view of Kolob and the other great governing bodies is given. The Lord said to Abraham:

"These are the governing ones; and the name of the great one is Kolob, because it is near unto me, for I am the Lord thy God: I have set this one to govern all those which belong to the same order of that upon which thou standest."

We may first observe that this conception is wonderfully enlarging to the mind. This any one may discover who will stand on a clear starlight night and gaze into the starry depths whilst casting over in his mind this truth revealed to Abraham.

We infer from the Book of Abraham, translated by Joseph Smith and by him published to the world, that our sun is governed by another sun or star about which it makes its gigantic revolutions, bearing us along with it.

This truth harmonizes beautifully with a late deduction of astronomy. That science now teaches that our sun is not stationary, but on the contrary its evidence proves that the sun and the whole solar system with it, including the earth, are heading toward the constellation Hercules at the rate of seven miles per second. This fact is established from many and careful calculations, but astronomy is there confounded. That the sun is tirelessly rushing along in the direction of the constellation mentioned is sure, but how governed and in what course men cannot tell.

At this point in the dilemma comes the words of the Lord to Abraham in the vision. Light is shed on the fact observed by learned men: the explanation is supplied. Our luminary is governed by a

higher and a greater body about which it takes its revolutions.

Now it has been stated that a fact differs from truth in this, that the fact is the bare phenomenon and its observance, while truth is the explanation of the fact. Then we may safely say that the science of astronomy has discovered the fact, but that Joseph Smith first published to the world the Truth, the explanation of the fact.

We will take up now the second part of the vision of Abraham, wherein the doctrine of plurality of Gods is brought out. It says:

"And they went down at the beginning, and they (that is, the Gods) organized and formed the heavens and the earth."

We mention this truth here because it is the first announcement in this age of a truth than which none could be more fundamental to man's salvation and exaltation.

Rightly looked at, the doctrine of the plurality of Gods has wrapped up within it that grand basic truth which is the very pivot around which all the works of God turn, viz., the sublime truth of the final exaltation of manhood to Godhood. Is not the accomplishment of this evolution the consummation towards which all creation rolls?

There is yet another item contained in the second part of Abraham's vision; it relates to the indefinite duration of the periods of creation.

The Genesis account of creation calls these periods days, and sectarian dogma has been that God created the world out of nothing in seven days. When the sciences of geology and biology pressed them hard, the defenders of what was supposed to be the Bible account, fell back on the statement that a

day with the Lord is a thousand years with man. But this helped them not at all, since we are quite sure that the creation of our sphere has occupied almost countless thousands of years.

Now, until the Book of Abraham was published, in 1838, there was not to be found in all Christendom a key to unlock this mystery. Many a library shelf has groaned under the heavy weight of learned volumes devoted to the reconciliation of science and religion on this one score, but in vain.

In regard to the idea of creation out of nothing, we now know that this error arose from simple misunderstanding of the term creation. All the churches now see their former error. Create means to form and organize existing material into new forms. This is stated in the Book of Abraham thus: "We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell." In 1838, when this was first published by Joseph Smith, it was new doctrine.

Regarding the duration of the periods of creation, the Book we are considering handles it thus: the Gods go down and execute the work that pertains to each period in the identical order outlined in Genesis. At the end of each period they (the Gods) number the days consumed. But as to how many days were consumed no mention is found.

The second period reads as follows:

"And the Gods also said, Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and it shall divide the waters from the waters. And the Gods ordered the expanse, so that it divided the waters which were under the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse, and it was so, even as they ordered. And the Gods called the expanse

heaven. And it came to pass that it was from evening until morning that they called night; and it came to pass that it was from morning until evening that they called day; and *this was the second time that they called night and day.*"

The last sentence reads as follows, in the sixth period:

"And it came to pass that it was from evening until morning they called night; and it came to pass that it was from morning until evening that they called day; and *they numbered the sixth time.*"

That is, they numbered the days and nights consumed in the execution of the work of the period. But, it will be noticed, how many days and nights were numbered is not mentioned. Hence ample scope is there for the great lengths of time that were needed to form and garb this earth.

Therefore we observe a complete harmony between the word of God and the discoveries of science.

Now we shall consider briefly the manner of the coming forth of the Book of Abraham. And in this will be found another new principle made plain though not taught specifically, namely, the relation between study and revelation. It is clearly shown here what great results can be accomplished by study and the Spirit of the Lord. We do not know where both these are so conspicuously employed to bring about so superb a gem as in the case of the translation of the Book of Abraham.

Early Church History recounts the incident of Oliver Cowdery's attempting to translate the Book of Mormon, but failing; and also the word of the Lord to him explaining the cause of failure, as follows:

"Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you when you took no thought, save it was to ask me; but behold, I say unto you, that you must study it

out in your own mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore you shall feel that it is right."

The translation of the Book of Mormon required study, then. We shall see how much greater study and also research was required in the Book of Abraham.

The translation of the Book of Mormon was accomplished mostly by the aid of the Urim and Thummim. The translation of the Book of Abraham was wrought out with no such aid. We find that many weeks and months were consumed in the work of turning into English from Egyptian hieroglyphics, the twenty-one pages of the Book of Abraham.

Nor will any one be likely to dispute the abstruseness of the task the Prophet here set himself. We may believe the system of picture writing employed by the ancient Egyptians offers serious problems in its mastery. Most likely the form of writing employed by Abraham was that used exclusively by the priests and scholars, the form most highly developed and hence most complicated. The fact, also, that both the literature and inscriptions of all Egypt were to the whole Christian world a sealed book with not so much as one page decipherable by all the learning of Europe for hundreds of years till by chance the key—the Rosetta stone—was found during Napoleon's Egyptian campaign—this fact, emphasizes the really troublesome labor Joseph here assumed. Remember that, although the key to Egyptian hieroglyphics had been discovered, and those puzzles in stone and papyrus at last solved, in Europe, still this knowledge was of no possible avail to the unschooled Prophet, away from the seats of learning, in the

frontiers of Ohio. Joseph Smith, here in Kirtland, in the 'thirties, succeeded, by his own labors, assisted only by the Spirit of the Lord, in accomplishing that difficult work which the whole world had signally failed at for hundreds of years—namely, the correct translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The information we have of the laborious duty of translating this Book is all too brief; but it is enough to indicate in outline the effort and time consumed.

As soon as the records were purchased by the brethren at Kirtland, Joseph worked out sufficient translation to ascertain the principal contents of the two rolls. He learned they comprised the Book of Joseph and the Book of Abraham. The experience the Prophet had gained in translating the Book of Mormon aided him, no doubt, here. Characters on the papyrus resembled in some points the characters copied from the Nephite plates. This was early in July, 1835.

On July 19, we read the following in Joseph's own history:

"The remainder of this month I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients."

Here are twelve days and evenings mostly used in commencing the work. One point is prominent and that is the difference in this manner of translating and the method used with the Book of Mormon. Joseph exerted every faculty of his mind to wring out the interpretation.

Again, on October 1, he writes:

"This afternoon I labored on the Egyptian alphabet in company with Brothers Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps, and during the research the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients unfolded to our understanding."

The phrase here employed, "I labored on the Egyptian alphabet," speaks much as to the arduous work.

On October 8 the real beginning of the translation was begun; and again on November 20 he writes: "We spent the day in translating and made rapid progress." He mentions the work of translating as being continued on three other days of the month of November.

Then from November 26, 1835, until March, 1842, we find no further mention of the translation. In the last named month the Book of Abraham was published in the *Times and Seasons* at Nauvoo. Undoubtedly the Prophet, during the momentous years between 1835 and 1842 was pre-occupied. He was soon compelled to flee from Kirt-

land; and later passed through the terrible Missouri persecutions and imprisonment; then Nauvoo was founded and then Joseph enjoyed a brief period of freedom from vexations without, and the English translation of the Book of Abraham soon appeared.

The entry in his history, under date of March 1, 1842, is: "I commenced publishing my translation of the Book of Abraham in the *Times and Seasons*." If we note the phrase, "my translation of the Book of Abraham," we shall catch again a slight reminder of the great personal labor, and study and research Joseph Smith had bestowed in giving to the world a clear, pure English translation of this record written by Abraham in hieroglyphics, nearly four thousand years ago.

