

COMMON CARRIER: AUTHOR DEFENDS IMAGE OF JOSEPH SMITH AS PROPHET
Salt Lake Tribune, November 25, 1973

First of all let me make perfectly clear that I have not paid Jerald or Sandra Tanner a cent for the fine publicity they have given my forthcoming book. It is all about the “Book of Breathings,” and is 800 pages long, but that is not enough to account for keeping the impatient Tanners waiting for six years. What took up all that time was having to find out about a lot of things.

First there was the Abraham problem which, about 1960, started spilling out all over as all sorts of old legends and reports about Abraham in a dozen languages began to come off the presses for the first time and students everywhere began re-evaluation of Abraham as man and myth. The really formidable challenge of the Book of Abraham is that it is no fiasco: it is simply packed with details that come right out of the newly published sources – whether the stuff is legendary or historical is beside the point, which is that it tells the same story of Abraham that Joseph Smith does, a story not found in the Bible and entirely unknown to the contemporaries of the Prophet. This was a development that could not be ignored, and a preliminary study took up some of the six years.

Matter of Egyptian

Then there was the matter of Egyptian. A few courses at Berkeley and Chicago were hardly adequate for dealing with the peculiar document in question, which, as it turns out, lies in an area unexplored by Egyptologists for almost a hundred years. It has taken at least five more years to learn Egyptian as well as I should have known it in the first place. Most of all, however, it was the Book of Breathings itself that stopped the clock, as final returns were repeatedly postponed to hear from some new precinct. After almost a century of total neglect, the Book of Breathings has suddenly become the object of intensive study by various European scholars, with new and unknown texts coming out almost monthly as new points of view take form. Of particular importance has been the discovery of the prince of Book of Breathings, Leiden Papyrus T32, which set the Dutch scholar B. H. Stricker on the hot trail with the first in-depth studies of the “Breathing” literature ever to be made. At the risk of contradicting the declaration of the Tanners and their infallible informant, that the Book of Breathings was a pagan document which has absolutely nothing to do with Abraham or his religion,” Prof. Stricker and other editors of Breathing text insist that it has intimate ties with Judaism and Christianity, and in particular Stricker would refer us to Abraham as representative of the rites and ordinances which are the subject of the Book of Breathings.

Identified by Whom?

It would seem that Mr. and Mrs. Tanner have been hopelessly hung up from the first on one issue, to which they perpetually revert with a sort of hypnotic fascination. It is the claim that the Book of Breathings has been “identified as the very source of the Book of Abraham.” Identified by whom? By them, to be sure. The minute I saw the text I declared that it could not

possibly be the source of the Book of Abraham because it was a “Sen-sen” text – that being about all I could make out of it at the time. This displeased my colleagues at BYU who were desperately hoping that we had struck pay dirt, while the opposition promptly published my statement as an admission that the Book of Abraham was a fraud – a maneuver worthy of Watergate. What everybody conveniently overlooked was that Joseph Smith, who went out of his way to connect the three Facsimiles with Abraham, never put forth the Book of Breathings as his source, but instead described a very different document as the text of Abraham. The manuscript of the Book of Abraham according to him was perfectly preserved, beautifully written, and contained rubrics or passages in red ink. Where does this leave the Book of Breathings, which was badly damaged even before it was mounted at Kirtland, is the one fragment so badly written that it would disgrace any scribe, and contains not a speck of red ink? If this is the Book of Abraham, how does it happen that Joseph Smith in his careful description fails to mention the most striking thing about it – the full-page illustration at the beginning? But doesn’t the illustration, which does belong to the Book of Abraham, being found attached to the Book of Breathings show that the two must be the same? Not if you know how the Egyptians did these things, and that is important.

Warns Students to Be Aware

The editor of one of the most important Books of Breathing (Pap. Louvre 3279) warns the student to be aware of a peculiar practice of the Egyptians in illustrating their ritual texts, the rule being that the picture does not go with the text. “Once again, the illustration has only the remotest possible connection with the text, and it is exceedingly difficult to explain just what the reason is for this phenomenon, so common in the Later Period.” Only the last illustration in his book goes with the text, as Prof. Goyon writes. “As an exception, the title of the text actually corresponds with the drawing that accompanies it.” As for the other three drawings, they do not belong with Pap. 3279 where they are found, but match the contents of another papyrus, Louvre 3284, which is the closest relative of the Joseph Smith papyrus.

The text of the Book of Abraham twice refers its reader back to an illustration, and in doing so uses technical terms exactly matching those found in [the] Egyptian text where the reader is told that in order to understand just what such-and-such a ritual object or person (e.g. a ship or demon) looks like he must go back to such-and-such a place where a drawing of the thing may be found. When the Book of Abraham says, “And that you may have a knowledge of this altar, I will refer you to the representation of the commencement of this record” (Abr. 1:12) or, “That you may have an understanding of these gods, I have given you the fashion of them in figures at the beginning.” (1:14), it is speaking in the authentic Egyptian idiom; and the language clearly implies that the reader in this case doesn’t have the picture before him, but must be referred back “to the commencement of this record,” to “the figures at the beginning.” That is hardly the language that would be used if the figures were on the very page before the reader’s eyes, i.e. these instructions cannot have been taken from the first page of the Book of Breathings, where the critics profess to find them. The Abraham Papyrus may have belonged on the same roll as the Book of Breathings and Facsimile 1, but if so, it was in the section that has been cut off and lost.

Just What Happens

It if seems strange that the illustration to one story should accompany the text of another, the Joseph Smith papyrus is proof that that is just what happens, for, Abraham or not, the scene depicted in Facsimile No. 1 is nowhere referred to in the text that follows it – it belongs somewhere else, following the strange Egyptian custom. Only by matching up the fibers, in fact, is it possible to show that the conflicting text and vignette really were put on the same strip of papyrus.

All scholarship, like all science, is an ongoing, open-ended discussion in which all conclusions are tentative forever, the principal value and charm of the game being the discovery of the totally unexpected. In the beginning I opened correspondence with these people, admitting my limitations, franking groping and sparing for time. In response they quickly showed their true colors: my personal letters were promptly reproduced and circulated for sale, carefully presented out of context to make it appear that I was doubtful not of my own qualifications but those of Joseph Smith. Somebody stole film-strips of the Kirtland documents and without permission of their rightful custodians made and sold thousands of copies, incomplete and out of context, very loudly but quite wrongly advertising them as the very handwork of Joseph Smith himself. And all this amid perpetual and pious professions of total righteousness and the selfless search for truth – Watergate indeed!

Make Definitive Statements

The Tanners have never ceased to interpret the refusal of the Mormons (and me in particular) to make definitive statements about the papyri, as a sign not of weakness and ignorance (which it was), to say nothing of prudence and common sense, but as a tacit admission that Joseph Smith was a fraud.

If the years that have passed since the first publication of the Joseph Smith Papyri have been far from sufficient for a thorough examination of final conclusion, they have been adequate for opening up a world of evidence to be explored. How can we discuss these things if we have not done our homework? It is inexcusable for those who presume to set themselves up as a light to be as oblivious to what is going on as Mr. Nelson and the Tanners seem to be. If they are aware of sources beyond their own institution, they do not bother to mention them. Mr. John Fitzgerald now declares in the columns of *The Tribune* (Common Carrier, Oct. 7) that “those who give reporters information ought to be ... willing enough, courageous enough, brace enough, and fair enough ... to submit data that prove their statements.” But the first step for such willing, courageous, brace, and fair souls is to make an effort to find out just what information exists. This they have not done.

Photographically Reproduced

Coverup? The instant the church got possession of the papyri, photos were sent out to all the world. And in 1969 as soon as the 1832 version of the first vision was found, it too was photographically reproduced and published, along with all the other known versions. These are the “tapes”: with them before him any reader can judge for himself; all the rest is mere opinion and interpretation. Such frankness and candor in publication is virtually unheard of in the academic world. It greatly impressed the first Egyptologist to study the Joseph Smith Book of

Breathings: “The speed with which photographs of the Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri were published once they came into the possession of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” wrote Prof. Baer, “is a gratifying contrast to the secrecy with which their previous custodians surrounded them.” There has been plenty of covering, but by whom?

Do those people really believe that the Book of Abraham was translated from the Book of Breathings? That the book was produced in the very manner in which they protest, no book could possibly have been produced? Confronted with the reality of the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price, whose mere existence is a miracle (“what other performance can compare as a sheer tour-de-force?) those who set themselves to put us right confine their performance to demonstrating that these marvelous works were not produced in the conventional manner of the schools (whoever said they were?) and therefore must be a fraud. With endless protestations of honesty, integrity and virtue they manage from year to year to avoid all contact with the teeming sources by which these books must be tested, to flaunt with tireless repetition their two or three shopworn but hasty and unexamined charges of indiscretion on the part of the Prophet, producing as evidence the opinions of a mysterious “Mormon Egyptologist” whose credentials they prefer not to discuss. It is the purest Watergate.