Studies in Scripture

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SOME JOSEPH SMITH PAPYRI
REDISCOVERED (1967)

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Latter-day Saints commonly believed that the four Egyptian mummies and the accompanying papyri, the source material for the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, had been destroyed in the great Chicago fire of 1871—that is, until 27 November 1967. On that day the officials of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City presented to President N. Eldon Tanner, representing the First Presidency, eleven papyri fragments, including Facsimile No. 1 from the Book of Abraham, materials that were once in the possession of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

The scholarly intermediary who discovered the papyri fragments in the Metropolitan Museum's vast collections and who was instrumental in alerting the Church officials of their existence was Dr. Aziz Atiya, an internationally acclaimed scholar specializing in Egyptian and Arabic Manuscripts. This Egyptian-born educator was the past director of the University of Utah's Middle East Center. He was at the Metropolitan Museum in the early Spring of 1966 looking for supplemental pictures and illustrations to complement a book that he had recently written. While he was searching through some manuscripts he found a file which contained Facsimile No. 1, which he recognized from his reading of the Pearl of Great Price. Dr. Atiya stated that after he found Facsimile No. 1 he searched further and "saw more pieces of papyri stacked together and suspected that Providence had assisted."

The file contained ten additional pieces of papyri and a bill of sales transferring "four Egyptian mummies with the records of them" from three persons: Emma, the prophet's widow, their eldest son Joseph, and L. C. Bidamon, Emma's present husband, to a Mr. A. Combs. The bill of sales stated:
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This certifies that we have sold to Mr. A. Combs four Egyptian Mummies with the records of them. These mummies were obtained from the catacombs of Egypt sixty feet below the surface of the Earth, by the antiquarian society of Paris & forwarded to New York & purchased by the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith at the price of twenty four hundred dollars in the year eighteen hundred thirty five they were highly prized by Mr. Smith on account of the importance which attached to the record which were accidentally found enclosed in the breast of one of the Mummies. From translations by Mr. Smith of the Records these Mummies were found to be the family of Pharo King of Egypt. they were kept exclusively by Mr. Smith until his death & since by the Mother of Mr. Smith notwithstanding we have had repeated offers to purchase which have invariably been refused until her death which occurred on the fourteenth day of May last. L. C. Bidamon, Emma Bidamon, Joseph Smith [her son]. Nauvoo, Hancock Co. Ill, May 26.2

From whence did the Metropolitan Museum obtain these eleven fragments? The Museum staff was first made aware of the existence of these fragments on 16 January 1918, when Mrs. Alice C. Heusser of Brooklyn, New York, brought the eleven fragments to the Museum for their inspection. Mrs. Heusser's mother was a servant in the Combs family, and at Mr. Combs' death she reported that he left the papyri to her. In 1945 a museum administrator was reviewing the Museum's correspondence file for 1918 and noticed a memorandum mentioning Mrs. Heusser's visit to the museum. He attempted to correspond with the Heusser family but discovered that they had moved from Brooklyn. Contact was finally made with the Heusser family in the Spring of 1946. It was found that Mrs. Alice Heusser had passed away, but her husband, then in his eightieth year, was still alive and did have in his possession the papyri fragments.

In the Summer of 1946 arrangements were finalized, and the eleven papyri fragments and the bill of sales were purchased by the Museum. They remained at the museum for the next two decades, until they were discovered by Dr. Atiya in 1966.

From the above information, coupled with various Church History accounts, the following conclusions can be drawn:
1. The prophet Joseph Smith had charge of the mummies and the papyri that he purchased from Michael H. Chandler in 1835 until his martyrdom in 1844.

2. At the Prophet's death the four mummies and the papyri were entrusted into the care of Lucy Mack Smith, the Prophet's widowed mother, until her death on 14 May 1856.

3. Emma, the Prophet's widow, had cared for her former mother-in-law, Lucy Mack Smith, during the last few weeks of her life. Two weeks after Lucy Smith died Emma sold the four mummies and "the records of them" to a Mr. A. Combs. The date of the sale was 26 May 1856. The sellers were listed as L. C. Bidamon (Emma's husband), Emma Bidamon, and Joseph Smith, the Prophet's and Emma's oldest son.

4. Mr. Combs sold two of the mummies with some papyri to the St. Louis Museum in St. Louis, Mo., in the Summer of 1856. There they remained until July of 1863 when they were sold to the Chicago Museum. The whereabouts of the other two mummies and any papyri that may have been with them is unknown.

5. By January 1864, the original buyers of the Chicago Museum had sold out to Colonel Joseph H. Wood, who changed the name of the Museum to the Wood's Museum. The mummies and papyri remained in Col. Wood's care until the great Chicago fire of October 1871.

6. Mr. Combs did not dispose of all the papyri that he purchased from Emma in 1856. The fragments that were located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art came from Mr. Combs through his housekeeper to her daughter, Mrs. Alice C. Heusser, whose widower sold them to the Museum.

Other papyri from the Joseph Smith collection may yet surface. This writer also wonders if the Prophet Joseph Smith translated more of the papyri into English than the five chapters presently published in the Pearl of Great Price. Joseph Smith had intended to translate more, but whether he had time to do so during those last hectic months of his life is unknown.
Some Joseph Smith Papyri Rediscovered

NOTES

1From Jay M. Todd's account entitled "Egyptian Papyri Rediscovered," in the January 1968 Improvement Era, p. 14. The entire article is well-written and factually based upon the data that was available at that early date. Dr. Atiya's account of the transfer of the records from the Museum to the Church is most interesting.

2Ibid., p. 16.
3See Times & Seasons 4 (1 February 1843): 95.