

## LDS Perspectives Podcast

### Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee

(Released January 3, 2017)

*This is not a verbatim transcript.  
Some wording and grammar has been modified for clarity.*

**Laura Hales:** I'm here today with John Gee. Tell me what you do, John.

**John Gee:** I am an Egyptologist, and I am a research professor at Brigham Young University, so I do a lot of research, and sometimes they let me teach a class.

**Laura Hales:** What kind of research do you do?

**John Gee:** I have two hats. One of them, I do research on the ancient world and Egyptology, and the other hat is research on ancient scripture, Bible, Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price.

**Laura Hales:** Also, here is Amanda Brown. Tell us a little bit about yourself, Amanda.

**Amanda Brown:** I am a master's student at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, studying Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East, and it's great.

**Laura Hales:** Well, we're going to ask you some questions about, what else, the Book of Abraham. Five years ago, I thought the Book of Abraham was a book written by Abraham, translated from some papyri that Joseph Smith happened to be able to purchase in 1835. Since that time, my thoughts on the Book of Abraham have changed.

How many years have you studied the Book of Abraham?

**John Gee:** In a professional, scholarly way?

**Laura Hales:** Yes.

**John Gee:** It's been about thirty-one now.

**Laura Hales:** Okay, so thirty-one years you've studied the Book of Abraham. Tell me what the Book of Abraham is to you.

## *Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

**John Gee:**

Okay, well actually, your basic outline of what you understood five years ago is more or less correct. There's some papyri that they purchased from a man named Michael Chandler. We're not really that sure where he got them from. We've been able to trace the papyri. We haven't been able to trace Chandler's association with it back more than a month from before Joseph Smith bought them from him.

When he sold the papyri, he told a story to Joseph Smith about the papyri — about where they came from and where they got them. Several people have tried to check details on that story. Chandler said that he was the nephew of Antonio Lebolo, who dug up the papyri. Well, they've done the genealogical research, and he's not Lebolo's nephew. I think what you have in the church history about where the papyri come from is their best understanding of what Chandler reported to them. Chandler, in some cases, made things up. In some cases, it may be that they misunderstood what he said. Some of it appears to be garbled. Some of it appears to be fabricated.

**Laura Hales:**

Now, it isn't *unusual* for antiquities dealers to not tell the whole truth.

**John Gee:**

Oh, well not only to not tell the whole truth, it's not unusual for them to simply fabricate claims. Buying antiquities on the antiquities market is notorious for problems. So far I've had only two objects that have been brought to me to ask for an evaluation that weren't forgeries or weren't obvious forgeries. The other two may still be forgeries, but they're at least not blatant forgeries.

They report in the history of the church the best that they have and there was a mistake when they printed the history of the church. Somebody misread the cursive capital L as a capital S, and so they garbled the excavator's name. This sort of mistake happens, and you try to work on correcting them. It's not clear now that Lebolo, while he was involved with the papyri, was the one that excavated them. It's fairly clear now that he didn't own them.

Joseph Smith gets these papyri, and he gets this collection of [mummies]. We used to think it was five, now we think it's four. It's a little bit unclear. We have fragments of two different papyri that survived, but we know that he had a lot more than that. He translates these documents, but we don't know that the Book of Abraham was finished being translated. The last published thing that Joseph Smith published said, "to be continued," but it

## *Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

never was. This is a record of Abraham. We can test it by looking at how it matches documents from Abraham's day, to see how good it is for Abraham's [time]. This is something they couldn't do in Joseph Smith's day because most of the languages and the material has been either dug up or deciphered since Joseph Smith's death.

**Laura Hales:** In the early 1800s, these papyri are excavated. They make their way to Kirtland. The prophet buys them in 1835 for about \$2,400, and he doesn't do anything with them. He says, "These are the words of Abraham and Joseph," and then when he goes to Nauvoo in 1844, no 1842 ...

**John Gee:** He publishes them in 1842, so let me fill in a little bit.

**Laura Hales:** Okay.

**John Gee:** He translates a little bit of it in July of 1835, and there's another translation session that goes on in October. It may stretch into November. Then Oliver Cowdery comes back from a trip, and he has a Hebrew grammar and a Hebrew dictionary and some Greek materials as well. Joseph Smith picks up the Hebrew, and within a week of getting these Hebrew books, he's studying Hebrew and no longer working on the Egyptian. The Hebrew just sucks up all of his time. Amanda, you know something about that.

**Amanda Brown:** So much about that.

**John Gee:** He starts translating that, and we have no record of him doing anything with the Book of Abraham until late 1841 when he starts preparing it for publication. They published it in installments in the *Times and Seasons*, and they got the first installment that has about two chapters and one of the facsimiles. The second installment has the rest of what we have in the published Book of Abraham and facsimile two. The third installment has facsimile three but no text. Then we don't have any of the others, and just as frustrating, we have some manuscripts. People would copy the translation of the Book of Abraham. One person did it in his journal. They had visited Joseph Smith, and they had copied down part of it but not all of it, and so we have about five different manuscripts.

If you put them all together, you don't actually have all of the Book of Abraham that we have in the published edition. We don't have manuscripts for half of it. Then we don't have all of what was there, and

## *Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

we don't have all that he, necessarily all, that he translated. Most of our manuscripts come from William Appleby; they come from W. W. Phelps. Only one of them was in the possession of Joseph Smith. It isn't complete, so we don't know what happened to the manuscripts. I have lots of great speculation, but it's speculation, so we'll just leave that aside.

**Laura Hales:** That is fascinating to me. I have never heard that before. I know that it was first printed in Great Britain.

**John Gee:** No. Well, it was first printed in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. Then it was gathered in 1851, I think, in the Pearl of Great Price. England, actually at that time, had more church members than anywhere else in the world, but they had almost no church literature. Franklin Richards, the youngest apostle and the president of the European Mission headquartered in England, gathered up all of these revelations that he could get ahold of from the prophet, Joseph Smith. They include the Book of Abraham, the translation of Joseph Smith Matthew, so it had Joseph Smith's precision. All of this stuff that's now in the Pearl of Great Price, plus a few other things that were weeded out, like it had the hymn, "Oh Say What is Truth." He put them together, and he called it the Pearl of Great Price. It wasn't a tract, it was for the saints who already believed. He publishes it in 1851, and then it's published again in America in, I can't remember if it's 1879 or 1880, but it is canonized in 1880. You had all these British saints who had access to it and all these American saints who didn't in the meantime. When they canonized it in 1880, then all the church members had it.

There are funny things that you get with that, so the Doctrine of the pre-existence is most clearly laid out in Abraham 3, and so that's our best account of it. It's mentioned in other scriptures but nowhere near as clear a picture. Very few other scriptures actually put us into the picture the way that Abraham 3 does.

If you look through Joseph Smith's Nauvoo discourses, he's teaching the pre-existence, and he'll quote language from the Book of Abraham and in one case he refers back and says that he got this doctrine from translating a papyrus that's in his house.

**Laura Hales:** I have a question. Is he referring to this before or after 1842 when it's been published?

*Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

**John Gee:** Both.

**Laura Hales:** That's fascinating.

**John Gee:** Both, but especially after it's been published. If you look at discourses on the pre-existence that were done in the 1850s and 1860s in Utah, they all say, "Well, we teach this because Joseph Smith taught it." They don't know where it comes from. It isn't until around the 1890s that people finally start connecting it with this newly canonized Book of Abraham doctrine, and then it moves forward from there. For many, many years even decades, they only taught it because that's what they'd heard Joseph Smith teach, but if you go back and look at the records from Joseph Smith's days, he's getting it from the Book of Abraham.

For about fifty years, we had this doctrine that was based on scriptures, but we didn't know that it was based on scriptures.

**Laura Hales:** I think a lot of the discourse and distress over the last ten years about the topic has to do with provenance. You have brought up two issues. Usually we refer to the fragments in our possession that we got in 1967 that don't match the contents of the Book of Abraham but also you're saying we don't know where some of the manuscripts are that make up the contents. Let's talk about those two issues and the theories out there on where we got this book.

**John Gee:** Now you've actually raised a third issue but you probably didn't recognize it. Which one of those do I want to take first? What happened to the papyri is that toward the end of Joseph Smith's life, his father had died. His mother was a widow. She was living with them in the house, and people would come and visit, and they'd want to see things like the papyri, so he set out this system where he gave them to his mom and let her show them to people for 25 cents, and that's the going rate because P.T. Barnum, who has a mummy, is allowing people to see it for 25 cents. That's sort of the going rate at the time, and it's a way of providing her with an income. She kept doing this after Joseph Smith died. Well, she's got these mummies, and these papyri that she's exhibiting in the house, and she dies. Emma Smith, I think, is sick of having dead bodies lying around the house. Less than two weeks after Mother Smith dies, Emma sells the lot.

**Laura Hales:** Well, I think when we think of sarcophagi, we think of the beautiful, engraved cases.

*Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

**John Gee:** They didn't have the sarcophagi. They just had the mummies.

**Amanda Brown:** Mummies are ugly. I've seen Tutankhamen. He's not a pretty guy.

**John Gee:** Yeah, mummies, well, if you unwrap them, they're even less beautiful. They tend to be even less beautiful unless you're one of these anatomy people for whom the human body is a beautiful thing. Okay, so you get a lot of different reactions to artwork and even Egyptian artwork. I've seen the gamut, people who love the mummies and then people for whom that's just creepy. I'm going to charitably assume that Emma just thought, "These are creepy." So less than two weeks later, she sells them to a traveling salesman, Able Combs. He takes it, and he splits the collection up. Some of the material he sells to the St. Louis Museum, who then sells it to the Woods Museum, which was based in St. Louis, and then Woods decides he might be able to get a little more money if he took his museum and moved it to Chicago, so he does. The only problem with Chicago was that it was mostly built of wood. Not anymore. It's against building code. Has been since 1871 when most of the town burned down in the great Chicago fire, including Woods Museum.

For a long time, they traced them there and said, "Okay, they're destroyed," but they didn't know that he had split the collection up, and he kept a number of pieces. They were mounted under glass. They'd been mounted in 1837, maybe give or take a year but probably 1837, and he kept them. They passed through various hands, and some of this looks like it has some really interesting intrigue, but we'll leave that aside. Then they finally get offered to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1917.

The Met takes one look at them, knows what they are, and says, "We don't want them." Okay, sea change, twenty years later, you have this curator. No, it's thirty years later. Thirty years later you've got this curator who's retiring who's heard about these and decides to acquire them for the Met. He acquires them and then retires the next year. In 1966, Aziz Atiya, who is a Copt, so he's a Coptic Christian, and he's a professor at the University of Utah, is back doing research in those collections, and he notifies the museum he's coming. They said, "Yeah, you can come and look through our Coptic collections, and we have some stuff we'd like to show you." When he's there they show him the papyri and said, "Do you think the Mormons would want these?" He says, "I don't know. I'll try to find out."

## *Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

He comes back to Utah and, I mean he knows some Mormons but he doesn't know any church leaders, so it takes him a little while to contact the church leaders. They're interested, and they contact the Met. The Met begins the de-acquisition process. This is a fairly new thing that they've done at the museum. It was instituted by the director, who said, "We have all this stuff but not all of it is worth seeing," so he arranged to have a de-acquisition process. Otherwise museums would acquire and that would be it — dead end. They put it through the acquisition process. This has to be one of the first objects they ever de-acquisitioned, and it takes about a year. They end up presenting them to the church over Thanksgiving weekend in 1967. President Eldon Tanner brings them back to Utah. The church immediately said, "Yes, we've got these papyri." Well, that was the first that most people had ever heard of them. The papyri have been in church archives longer than they've been anywhere since they were dug up. That's one issue, where the various fragments are from.

If we look through the 19th century eyewitness statements, they describe mounted fragments, and these rolls that they have. Whenever they're talking about the Book of Abraham, they always say it comes from one of the rolls. This is even when they've got the fragments, we have the mounted fragments, not the rolls. The Book of Abraham was supposed to be on the rolls, not the fragments. When we look at the fragments, and we see: "Yeah, they don't contain the Book of Abraham. They contain the Book of the Dead and a Document of Breathing made by Isis, and that's not the Book of Abraham." But if we look at the 19th century eyewitnesses, this is the material that doesn't have the Book of Abraham on it. The fact that we can translate this and say, "Yes, this doesn't contain the Book of Abraham," that just confirms what the 19th century eyewitnesses said. The Book of Abraham is on the rolls, not the fragments. We have the fragments, not the rolls. That's part of the provenance issue. That's one of them.

Then you have various theories about where Joseph Smith got the Book of Abraham from. There are some people who think that Joseph Smith got it from the fragments. As far as I can tell, that's a minority viewpoint, even in the church. There's some people who think he got it from direct revelation, and there was no text of the Book of Abraham on any of the papyri. Then there are others who say it was on the papyri, just not the papyri we have. It wasn't on the fragments.

## *Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

The people who thought he got it from direct revelation can point to Warren Parish's statement that he made in the 1830s that he wrote down the Book of Abraham as Joseph received it from direct inspiration from heaven, but that's the method, so you can read that two ways. He got the translation from wherever it is or that he got the translation from heaven. If you're going to say it's not on the fragments you go with that statement, but there are other statements like Joseph Smith saying that he got the text of the pre-existence from translating papyri that he had in his house. Well, that makes it a little more difficult to say this is from inspiration, but those are some of the theories that people have.

**Laura Hales:** Okay, so the provenance having to do with the scrolls is twofold, I think. The scrolls, we don't think were written in the days of Abraham, do we?

**John Gee:** No, but one of the documents identified on the scrolls actually goes back to before Abraham's day because we have manuscripts that date before Abraham's day that have that same text. You have dates of a manuscript and the date of the text. Let's use the example of Paul's letters. In one of Paul's letters, he says, "See what a long letter I've written with my own hand," so there's the original, and he wrote that letter, but then that letter was copied, and so the earliest copy we have of that letter, I think, is third century, so that's 200 years after Paul.

There are lots of texts that get copied. You didn't publish a book; you copied it. There's the date you make the copy, the date of the manuscript, and then the date the text was originally written. Those are two different dates. Most of the papyri looks like they're about 2nd century B.C. There are disagreements. Some Egyptologists want to make some of the papyri 2nd century AD, but others want to make it first. I go with the earlier date because I think there's more evidence behind that. We know those Book of the Dead texts, in many cases, date at least 1,000 years and in some cases 2,000 years before they're copied down, yet we have these texts and some of them are dated before Abraham. Some of them dated to about the time of Moses, and yet here they are in this manuscript that comes from the 2nd century B.C.

The idea that you could have a really old text and a copy like that is just more or less standard from people who actually work with the documents. There is the date of the manuscript and the date of the text. It's not necessarily a problem for Abraham to be, or a text of Abraham to be in a manuscript that late.

*Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

**Amanda Brown:** Does the later date of the manuscript change how we should read the Book of Abraham today at all?

**John Gee:** Well, there's a theory of how does a text from Abraham end up in Egypt, in Thebes, in the Ptolemaic period? Here we're mainly hypothetical. There are a lot of different hypothesis about how the text could get transmitted there. One of them is that Abraham writes down his memoirs when he's in Egypt, and then they get transferred by the Egyptians. I prefer the idea that he wrote it, and it was transmitted to his descendants. We know that a number of Jews migrated to Egypt. You have a clear example of Israelites in Egypt. Jeremiah actually talks about being taken to Egypt along with a number of other Jews. We find records. You have a Jewish temple at Elephantini in the Persian period and one in Leontopolis in the Ptolemaic period. You have Jewish settlements all over Egypt. This is fairly well documented.

They could have kept it among themselves and then brought it with them to Egypt. We have Greek authors who, one of them, Hecataeus of Abdera, wrote an account of things that he learned from Egyptian priests about Abraham. Unfortunately, while we know the story behind the text — the text itself doesn't survive. We have some indications that the text about Abraham were circulating in Egypt around the time period of the papyri. It's a possible explanation, but again, it's a little bit short of proof.

**Laura Hales:** I have heard this idea from skeptics. You tell me what you think of it. You've said that it could be just a copy of a copy of a copy, which they did, which is common. Could it be pseudepigraphic, and explain to our listeners what that is?

**John Gee:** Okay, so there's another idea that's out there that the Book of Abraham is written by say some later Jew in Egypt, or goes down into Egypt, and it's not actually written by Abraham. It's written by somebody in his name. It's just as if it were an ancient historical novel, something like that. One I haven't read but I've heard about it saying that Abraham Lincoln is a vampire slayer or something like that. There's this novel out there, I guess, that claims this. Now that's historical fiction. It's taking a known historical person and writing a really fanciful account about them. That's an idea that's been kicked around. I have some problems with that because people who write historical novels tend to give away that they're not actually from the time period when the novel is taking place. They make mistakes in reconstructing that event.

## *Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

There are a number of things that you find in the Book of Abraham that are dead on for Abraham's day and not for a later time period. The human sacrifice element shows up in Abraham and is best attested in Abraham's days. Around Abraham's day we have archeological evidence for that practice. One of the prescriptive texts says that if somebody wanders into this area, unless it's a priest about his duties, he will be burned to death. We have some historical accounts of them actually doing it, so we have all of those things, and that's all from Abraham's day.

We don't have any archeological evidence of that from the time period of the papyri. We do have a full account of the ritual from that time period. We have two of them actually, and they both date from around the time, within 100 years or so of the papyri. There are a number of other indications that seem to fit better with Abraham's day, and so I have a hard time seeing how a pseudepigraphic text would explain those. I also have a sort of problem, if you're going to have a pseudepigraphic text, why does God want to reveal a pseudepigraphic text to Joseph Smith? He doesn't need to do a pseudepigraphic text. He can just give them a direct revelation like you have in the Doctrine and Covenants. If there is something important about pre-existence or covenants why not reveal it that way? That's not how it's done.

I don't see that revealing of false text is necessarily, I guess, I just don't see that working.

**Laura Hales:** In five sentences or less, can you describe to me the Book of Abraham controversy and where you presently find yourself?

**John Gee:** There are three historical time periods that deal with the Book of Abraham. There's the historical time period of Abraham, the historical time period of the papyri, and the historical time period of Joseph Smith to the present. I work in all three of those areas. A lot of the problems with the controversy have to do with focusing on only one of those areas, usually the 19th century people who deal with the 19th century and don't work with antiquity have problems dealing with ancient materials. They usually don't have the training or the inclination to work with them. If all you work in is the 19th century, it's hard to find ancient precedence because you're just looking in the 19th century.

Probably the most important time period is to look at Abraham's day and to focus on from the five chapters we have of the Book of Abraham and

*Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

Abraham's day tells us about that. I'm finding that there's a lot of interesting material that indicates the Book of Abraham comes out of that milieu and not the other two.

**Laura Hales:** Doctrinally, what do you find most important in the Book of Abraham besides talking about the pre-existence?

**John Gee:** Well, pre-existence is the big one. Half of your general conference citations of Abraham come from a few verses and a third of the material we use in the church. Yes, there is more in the Book of Abraham that could show up from say a doctrinal point of view, but the material we have, the pre-existence, is probably the most important. Abraham's covenant comes in second, and I think that's appropriate.

There are some things that I think we missed. If you look through the Book of Abraham, there's this theme about obedience that runs through the whole book, even in doing the Creation, it's not whether, you know. *God doesn't look and see whether it's good, he looks and sees whether it's obeying.* As a theme that can be developed, that comes out of the text, it even figures into the pre-existence parts: "We'll prove them here to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord, their God shall command them." The purpose of life is tied into that obedience theme, and it runs all the way through, and I've only touched on some of the passages. We could probably do more than that, but I think the church has the appropriate doctrinal emphasis in the most important place.

**Laura Hales:** As you can tell, we've just scratched the surface. You've studied thirty-one years. Do you think you're close to being done studying it?

**John Gee:** No. No, I don't. There's a whole lot more of the research that I'm still trying to get out and then there are other areas that I haven't even got to yet, so I'm not done yet.

**Laura Hales:** It's rich for study.

**John Gee:** It is. The one thing I have to be careful with is that it's easy to have your gospel hobby horse, so this is the thing that you're good at and this is the thing you do, so I do a lot with Book of Abraham, but the gospel is so, and the scriptures we have are so much richer than just the Book of Abraham. While it's important to do work on the Book of Abraham, I think it's also

*Episode 16: Joseph Smith's Papyri with John Gee*

important not to neglect the richness that's in the rest of the scriptures and revelations that we've been given and not to make it a hobby horse.

**Laura Hales:** With that wonderful thought, we'll conclude. Thank you.

**John Gee:** Thank you very much.

**Disclaimer:** LDS Perspectives Podcast is not affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The opinions expressed on this episode represent the views of the guests and the podcaster alone, and LDS Perspectives Podcast and its parent organization may or may not agree with them. While the ideas presented may vary from traditional understandings or teachings, they in no way reflect criticism of LDS Church leaders, policies, or practices.