

LDS Perspectives Podcast

Episode 50: Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew with Matthew J. Grey

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This is not a verbatim transcript. The grammar has been modified from conversational tone.

Laura Harris Hales: Hello, this is Laura Harris Hales, and I'm here today with Matthew J. Grey.

Matt, can you tell us a little bit about your background?

Matthew Grey: Professionally, my background is in archeology and the history of early Judaism in the time of the New Testament. That was an interest that began during my undergraduate work at BYU, when I was in the Ancient Near Eastern Studies program. I went to graduate school and received a master's degree in archeology and the history of antiquity from Andrews University, and then received a second master's degree in Jewish Studies from the University of Oxford. I earned my PhD at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in archeology and early Judaism, which provided a nice background in the world of Jesus and the world of the New Testament.

I also work as an active field archeologist. During the summers, I continue to go to Israel and have been excavating an ancient Jewish village called Huqoq, which is near the Sea of Galilee. We've been uncovering the synagogue of that village, which has been very exciting.

In addition to my archeological fieldwork during the summers, I've been teaching on the faculty of the Ancient Scripture Department at BYU, where I teach mostly New Testament and classes on Jesus in his Jewish context.

Laura Harris Hales: I've heard you speak on the gospels, and you do a phenomenal job.

Matthew Grey: Oh, thank you.

Laura Harris Hales: I've learned so much.

But today, I'm going to focus on Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew. How did you become interested in the topic?

Matthew Grey:

When I was in graduate school during the summer of 2006, I was invited to teach an undergraduate course on Biblical Hebrew at BYU. It was fairly intensive — several hours a day. As we were going through this class, some of the students started to become a little bit frustrated with the rigor of the course, memorizing vocabulary, parsing verbs, and looking at the finer technicalities of grammar and translation. I was trying to think of ways to keep them motivated and excited to do the more detailed work of learning a language.

One of the ideas I had was to collect passages from Joseph Smith's journal where he talked about his own study of Hebrew and where he and early leaders of the church organized a Hebrew class. They brought in a professional Jewish teacher, who we'll talk about later. As they were working through the course, they were doing the exact same things that my students were doing: memorizing vocabulary and working on verbs. And on the finer points of translation, Joseph's class struggled; they had challenges. It was difficult, but they thoroughly enjoyed what it was doing for them, not only intellectually but also spiritually.

As I was sharing that material with the students, I became personally fascinated in the topic myself. I found myself wanting to know more about why Joseph was studying Hebrew: how he proceeded in that endeavor and about the impact that it had on the church as well as on early Mormon thinking and practices.

Over the years, as a result, I developed a side project to collect more material on Joseph's study of Hebrew. This has included trying to learn more about the larger context of Hebrew study in early America and trying to find some of the surviving Hebrew grammar books that were used in the Kirtland class. The result of this side project has been a series of articles that have been published or are in preparation for publishing.

Laura Harris Hales: I've read the chapter you wrote in *Approaching Antiquity*, and you have in there a picture of a Amasa Lyman's workbook from his Hebrew class. I was so impressed. This is not easy stuff.

Matthew Grey:

Right.

Laura Harris Hales: Some call the winter of 1835–36 a plateau of pleasantness and peace at the center of the church. This is right after Zion’s Camp. We have this little quiet period and then the church sort of implodes in 1837 after the Kirtland Safety Society's anti-bank failure.

Matthew Grey: Right.

Laura Harris Hales: It’s during this period, though, that Joseph Smith embarked on one of the most ambitious CES endeavors, the Hebrew school. At first glance, it seems a bit random. Is there anything in the surrounding Christian culture that could account for a group of largely uneducated Saints attempting to learn a quite difficult ancient language?

Matthew Grey: Yeah, I think there are a few things that are important to establish in the context of Joseph Smith’s early fascination with the Hebrew language as well as other Latter-day Saints’ interest in learning the language. That context goes back to the earliest days of the Protestant Reformation. Ever since the early European Reformation, there’s been a fascination among Protestants for learning the original languages of the Bible: the study of Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament. That Protestant interest came over with the Puritans to America. In the early pre-revolutionary colonial colleges, Hebrew became an important part of the curriculum for the purpose of training Protestant clergy.

Even though by the late 1700s there had been a slight decline in Hebrew interest in deference to the classical languages of Greek and Latin, through the 1820s–1840s there was a Hebrew revival in America. That intellectual climate of the early nineteenth century prompted Joseph to create a school system in Kirtland that would prepare church leaders and church missionaries in the basics of biblical translation that would help them in the ministry and, as Joseph believed, would help with the establishment of Zion.

Laura Harris Hales: Was it a desire to get at the deeper roots of Christianity? Get back to the New Testament Church? Get back to the original Bible? In order to do that, you have to be able to read the Hebrew language.

Matthew Grey: There was definitely an idea among Protestants in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries that Hebrew contained pristine mysteries and that some of the earliest revelations that God gave to

humanity could be unpacked through a study of Hebrew and through reading the Old Testament text in its original Hebrew.

In early America, there also developed some unique ideas about the language. For example, there were some scholars and theologians at the time who believed that Hebrew was related to the original pure language spoken by Adam in the Garden of Eden, which remained humanity's common language until the Tower of Babel and the confounding of languages in the Book of Genesis.

Another aspect of the nineteenth century that's in an important context for Joseph is that there were many different religious leaders, theologians, and thinkers who believed that Native Americans somehow descended from ancient Israelites. There was a hope that, again, by understanding Hebrew, we might be able to recover some of those Native American Israelite origins. That idea, of course, would be fascinating to Joseph Smith and other church members.

I think that all of these things combined — this confluence of ideas and fascination with Hebrew — are going to motivate Joseph Smith and be part of his larger restoration project.

Laura Harris Hales: Now this wasn't Joseph's first foray into studying languages. He dabbled with W.W. Phelps on the Adamic language. Charismata was still really big in the church when it was formed. People were speaking in tongues, ostensibly in the Adamic language. We can see a fascination.

Matthew Grey: Yes.

Laura Harris Hales: Can you pinpoint why, besides it being a quiet time and there being an opportunity, Joseph would choose this point in time to start studying Hebrew seriously?

Matthew Grey: Yeah, it's a great question. I think that we need to take a step back and remember that Joseph's fascination with languages, as you said, were present from the very beginning of the Restoration movement. Some of the earliest titles given to him in revelation — D & C 21, for example — identify Joseph as a seer, a prophet, and a translator.

From the very beginning, Joseph viewed his work of translation as an important part of his prophetic identity. We see that, of course, with his

earliest translation project, the Book of Mormon. This text, according to his understanding, was a reformed Egyptian document that it seems Joseph and his contemporaries identified as some kind of an amalgamation of Hebrew and Egyptian.

From the very beginning, there was an interest in learning ancient languages; although, it's fascinating that in the earliest years of Joseph's work, his translation activities were almost all supernatural. It was his work with seer stones; it was his work with divine inspiration, perhaps some visionary elements; it was his supernatural prophetic gifts that allowed him to work with the Book of Mormon translation, with his new revision or translation of the Bible, and even with a Johannine parchment that he saw in vision.

I think that's going to start changing in late 1832 and early 1833 with a series of revelations in which God commands him and the Latter-day Saints to engage with intellectual learning. This series of revelations — sections 88, 90, and 93 — instructs Joseph and the Saints to study out of the best books — to learn history, politics, theology, and even language — which I think would have been understood as language in the traditional manner.

By the early to mid-1830s, when the Kirtland school system began to be organized, there was an interest in learning languages in a more traditional manner. Initially the only language courses that would be offered in the school was English grammar. (I think it was important for many early Latter-day Saint converts to learn English first as a way to prepare to be better ministers in the kingdom.) But by 1835 they decided to start learning biblical languages, beginning with Hebrew.

Later on, the Saints will study Greek and Latin as well. But the timing for the Hebrew class is very interesting. It's not a coincidence that the emphasis on studying Hebrew formally did not come until after the arrival of the Egyptian papyri in Kirtland in July of 1835, after their initial work with the papyri. It's shortly after that that they organized the Hebrew school.

Laura Harris Hales: If we look at the *History of the Church*, Joseph Smith purchased scrolls of papyri in July, like you just mentioned. Then he commences his study of Egyptian and creates with W.W. Phelps and some others something we call the GAEL, which is an Egyptian dictionary of some kind.

Matthew Grey: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura Harris Hales: Egyptian transcribers right now would see no correlation between the characters and the words that they put down.

Matthew Grey: Right.

Laura Harris Hales: We're not quite sure what that was. Then Joseph moves on to the study of Hebrew. How do you think these events are related?

Matthew Grey: In the past, many have looked at those as two separate projects. He begins in the summer of 1835 by working with the papyri, creating this Egyptian alphabet and grammar that you referred to, and doing his initial work of translation on the Book of Abraham — all deriving from his interaction with the papyri. But then he stops and shifts over to Hebrew studies by the end of the year, and by January of 1836 he's fully immersed in a Hebrew course that lasts all the way through that spring. However, I think it's becoming clear that those two projects were meant to work together.

We need to remember that in the early nineteenth century, no one really knew how to decipher Egyptian. Jean Champollion had done some work with the Rosetta stone in Europe and some of that research had begun to make its way to America, but by and large, most historians, scholars, and theologians in early nineteenth-century America still did not know how to translate Egyptian. In that time, there was an assumption that Egyptian, like Hebrew, descended from that common, ancient, pristine Adamic language, and that Egyptian and Hebrew were the surviving ancient languages with the closest resemblance to that pure language of Adam.

There were several scholars and thinkers in the early nineteenth century who believed that one of the best ways to decipher Egyptian characters was to go through Hebrew first — to work through the Hebrew and reverse engineer the meaning of the Egyptian characters. There are several examples in the early nineteenth century of scholars doing just that. When Egyptian texts or inscriptions were uncovered or discovered in Egypt, they turned to the Hebrew language or to Hebrew scripture in their attempt to decipher them.

I think it's interesting that when Joseph Smith began working with the papyri, and began working on the Egyptian alphabet and grammar you referred to, he seemed to have shared the common view that one way he

could unpack the meaning of these Egyptian characters was to learn Hebrew.

Within three months of working with the papyri, he decided that it was time to organize a formal Hebrew class. I think the two projects were meant to work together, but since the school semester wouldn't start for a few months and he wanted to get started, he jumped right into the papyri — right into the Egyptian alphabet and grammar document — and he began the first few chapters of translation with the Book of Abraham. Then when it was finally time and the resources were finally in place, he turned his efforts to Hebrew, not as a distraction from the Egyptian project, but as a way to elucidate the Egyptian project. I think that it's clear that in his formal Hebrew studies, he kept looking for ways in which they could inform his ongoing translation of the Book of Abraham.

Laura Harris Hales: This was not a casual undertaking. I think if a group decided, “Hey, I want to start a Hebrew class,” it would be difficult even now to find a professor to come teach remedial students how to learn a very complex language.

Matthew Grey: Sure.

Laura Harris Hales: As you've mentioned at the beginning of the podcast, this is not an easy language to learn. Can you tell us a little bit more about the Hebrew school, how it got started, who taught it, and who attended?

Matthew Grey: It's an interesting process of development ... how this class came to be. By the summer of 1835, Joseph and his associates were already immersed in the Egyptian project. By the early part of October of 1835, they decided that a Hebrew class would help facilitate the project.

The earliest evidence for the organization of the Hebrew class begins with the formation of a committee in October 1835. Its purpose was to find a teacher, to identify the best resources, and to figure out how to incorporate a formal class into the Kirtland school system that academic year.

At first, they found a nearby Jewish professor of physics named Daniel Peixotto, who taught at Willoughby Medical College, which was not far from Kirtland. In November 1835, Joseph and some of the other leaders of the church attend a physics lecture given by Daniel Peixotto, and they realized that it would be a wonderful start to their Hebrew studies if they could get Peixotto to teach the course. They invited him, and at first

Peixotto was willing and even recommended some Hebrew resources that they needed to acquire first. By the end of November 1835, Joseph Smith sent Oliver Cowdery to New York to acquire the Hebrew resources that a class like that would need.

There is an interesting account of Oliver going to New York City and acquiring a collection of different Hebrew resources, including *Hebrew Grammars* written by Moses Stuart, copies of the *Biblia Hebraica* (the Old Testament in Hebrew), and copies of Josiah Gibbs *Lexicon of Hebrew*. Oliver Cowdery brought all of these resources back to Kirtland.

Unfortunately, though, by then Peixotto had fallen through. So Joseph and his associates had all of these Hebrew resources and no Hebrew teacher, but that wasn't going to stop Joseph Smith.

Joseph began opening his Hebrew books and started an almost two-month-long personal study of his Hebrew books. It makes you wonder how far he would've gotten on his own, but certainly during those two months, he read through his grammar books trying to teach himself the alphabet and maybe the basics of vocabulary. He also opened his Hebrew Bible and tried to read the early passages of Genesis in Hebrew.

Again, you wonder how successful he might have been in those early days, especially because some of his resources were very technical and difficult to work through without a proper instructor. Yet throughout December and early January, that's exactly what Joseph Smith did. In fact, by early January Joseph didn't want to wait any longer, so he organized a class and appointed himself to be the teacher. The process seems to be that Joseph would read some chapters out of his Hebrew books the previous night, and the next day try to teach them to the members of the school.

As you can imagine, there were some mixed results. They had moments where they were very excited about what they were learning (or what they thought they were learning). They also had moments of frustration, debate, and discouragement. For example, there's an interesting story in which Orson Pratt and Joseph Smith began debating the proper pronunciation of a Hebrew letter. Joseph claimed to have won the debate, but in reality I don't think either of them knew enough to be certain.

Initially it was very difficult to start the course, but that changed in late January of 1836. By that point they had identified a scholar in the region

named Joshua Seixas, who was a Jewish scholar of ancient languages. He was a fairly young scholar, about the age of Joseph Smith at the time (in his early thirties). He had a series of academic appointments teaching adjunct at different colleges throughout the Northeast and, as it turns out, in 1835 he was finishing a semester of teaching Hebrew at the nearby Oberlin College. Somehow Joseph and the Saints became acquainted with Joshua Seixas, this Jewish scholar of Hebrew, and had convinced him to relocate to Kirtland.

When Joshua Seixas arrived in Kirtland in late January 1836, he organized a formal seven-week intensive study of Hebrew using his own materials: his own grammar books and worksheets. At the beginning of the Hebrew school, there were over one hundred Latter-day Saints who were either interested in learning Hebrew or who were personally invited by Joseph Smith to study the language as part of the class. Initially, most of these class members were leaders of the church or were elders who were preparing to go on their missions that summer. Among the earliest members of the class were early Mormon leaders such as Brigham Young, Heber Kimball, W.W. Phelps, Oliver Cowdery, Orson Pratt, Orson Hyde, Hyrum Smith, and, of course, Joseph Smith. It was the “who’s who” of early Mormon leadership, and they were all involved in the Hebrew class.

Some were more enthusiastic about it than others. (Brigham had to come a little reluctantly.)

Laura Harris Hales: I was going to say, I think it was like an “army invitation.” You were invited, and you *will* be there.

Matthew Grey: You will be there. Yes, that’s exactly right.

Laura Harris Hales: Yeah. I heard that Brigham Young was allowed to go work on the temple.

Matthew Grey: He was.

Laura Harris Hales: Because he was struggling.

Matthew Grey: Brigham struggled.

Laura Harris Hales: So much.

Matthew Grey: He did struggle. He struggled in class. Heber C. Kimball also struggled in class. Yeah, no question about that. Some of the others were actually quite excited about it, such as Phelps and Cowdery. Orson Pratt was quite good at ancient languages naturally.

I did want to say, though, that in addition to this fairly large group of early Mormon leaders and early Mormon elders, there were women and maybe even some young adults in the class as well. For example, there is an account of a woman, a 30-year-old mother of four named Persis Goodall Young, who decided to attend the class, and she was actually commended by Joshua Seixas as consistently being the best prepared student in the course. There are other accounts of women who weren't able to attend the class, but who would study their husband's Hebrew books at home.

As the class developed, Joshua Seixas organized an intensive seven-week course. He divided his 120 students into four classes that would each meet daily, and that would work through the basics of Hebrew vocabulary, grammar, and translation using Seixas's textbooks and using a series of worksheets that he assigned as homework. The members of the class would take these worksheets home, fill them out, work on parsing verbs and so forth, and hand them in as part of the instruction.

Between the journal entries of these students, the surviving Hebrew grammar books with the notes in the margins, and some other evidence, we're able to provide a modest reconstruction of how this course worked.

We know that in the early part of the course they began with learning the basics of the Hebrew alphabet and Hebrew spelling, which Seixas taught from a very distinct perspective. Seixas taught a Sephardic Hebrew spelling system that wouldn't lessen the quality of their Hebrew studies, but that would leave a distinct mark on the way that they would eventually use Hebrew.

Laura Harris Hales: Now what is Sephardic?

Matthew Grey: Sephardic Hebrew is a pronunciation from the Mediterranean region that differs from the Central European pronunciation (what's called "Ashkenazic" Hebrew) that has since become the more common way of spelling Hebrew words into English. Joshua Seixas's family was Sephardic, so they had a different form of spelling that Seixas taught to his students, and that is the kind of spelling that Joseph Smith learned. When

Joseph Smith eventually used Hebrew in his translations and in his sermons, he used that distinct Sephardic spelling system he learned from Seixas. That system helps us to identify when and where Joseph used his course work in his prophetic work.

Laura Harris Hales: You're talking about when he's transliterating?

Matthew Grey: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura Harris Hales: When he's writing things down in the Roman alphabet?

Matthew Grey: Yes.

Laura Harris Hales: Instead of the Hebrew alphabet?

Matthew Grey: Exactly.

Laura Harris Hales: So someone who doesn't know Hebrew can pronounce it.

Matthew Grey: Exactly, and Joseph did that based on his training from Seixas. In addition to working through the grammar book and working through the worksheets, it was in that original seven-week class that Joseph began working on proper translation and began studying parts of Genesis, Exodus, and the Psalms in Hebrew.

Reading through Joseph Smith's journals is interesting because he absolutely threw himself into that study. Not only did he attend class every day for that seven-week period but he also requested personal tutorial sessions with Joshua Seixas and worked ahead on homework assignments because he was so excited to continue to do more. He attended additional lectures, attended other classrooms when he had free time, studied on Sunday, and studied when he was sick. This was all during a very busy administrative time for him, as he was getting ready to dedicate the Kirtland Temple. With everything else that he had going on, the fact that he took so much time and energy to learn Hebrew shows that it was very, very important to him and what he perceived as his prophetic work.

In fact, as I've shared this in different venues, several people have asked me, for example, "Well, wasn't that distracting to them as they're getting ready to dedicate the Kirtland Temple and have church business affairs and administrative issues? Wasn't taking that much time to study a

biblical language distracting to the greater spiritual goals that they had with the temple?” I think the answer is just the opposite. I think that Joseph did not see his study as distracting from his spiritual endeavors, but that he saw it as enhancing them. I think that he saw his interaction with biblical Hebrew and his ability to start reading, as he said, “the word of the Lord in the original,” as an opportunity to facilitate and intensify the spiritual experiences that would attend the Kirtland Temple dedication, which occurred toward the end of this Hebrew class.

Laura Harris Hales: It’s during this time where he’s translating Genesis that he runs across something that affects his theological thinking. Would you like to elaborate on that?

Matthew Grey: Sure. As I said earlier, I think that going into his Hebrew studies, the ongoing translation of the Book of Abraham was very much on his mind. For example, we know from journal entries made before the Hebrew class that Joseph was anticipating the Book of Abraham to shed light on the nature of God, the creation, and the cosmos. I’m fairly confident that he went into his Hebrew studies looking for potential insights into those issues — looking for ways in which Hebrew could enhance and inform not only his Abraham translation, but also his understanding of the nature of God, the creation of the world, and even the cosmos itself. And ultimately, I think he found what he was looking for.

For example, it’s during his initial Hebrew study in Kirtland in early 1836 that he noticed a technicality in Hebrew that would come to impact his thinking in significant ways, and that is the plural form of the Hebrew word for God, which is “*elohim*.”

Before that, Joseph had already had untraditional views of the nature of God; we see some of that in his earliest revelations. But I think that recognizing that the Hebrew word for God was plural — whether he recognized that in his earliest personal studies of Hebrew or he learned it from Seixas in class — got his mind thinking in a way and got the wheels turning in a way that, by the Nauvoo period, would result in some interesting theological developments as Joseph began contemplating the nature of God, the plurality of Gods, and the council of Gods. These later Nauvoo teachings, I think, have their roots in his study of Hebrew and his understanding of the Hebrew word “*elohim*” being plural.

Laura Harris Hales: Seixas didn’t buy this, did he?

Matthew Grey: No. In a later sermon in Nauvoo when Joseph was talking about the plurality of Gods, using the Hebrew word “*elohim*” as the evidence to support this teaching, he referred to a conversation that he had with “a learned Jew” about this very topic. We can only assume that the “learned Jew” he’s referring to was Joshua Seixas.

I think what happened was that, sometime during the Hebrew class in Kirtland, maybe as they were going through Genesis 1, which we know they translated as a class, Joseph stopped the instruction and pointed out, “This word is plural ... should we translate this as plural?” (which he would later do in Nauvoo). He tells us that “a learned Jew,” who is probably Seixas said, “No. Technically speaking, the word is plural in form, but it really should be translated as singular. That goes better with the singular verb and better with the original context of Genesis 1,” but Joseph wouldn’t have any of that. Joseph was convinced that if the word is plural in form, we should translate it as plural.

So, he did have a disagreement on this point with his teacher. I think his teacher graciously conceded at the end that he could theoretically translate it as plural, but that Joseph took it much further in his theological development than his teacher, Joshua Seixas, would have.

Laura Harris Hales: Can we see traces of Joseph’s use of Hebrew in the Book of Abraham?

Matthew Grey: We can. One of the ways in which Joseph revisited his Hebrew studies and in which his Hebrew studies impacted his work in the Nauvoo period was through his continuation and finalization of the Abraham translation.

As we said earlier in the podcast, the Book of Abraham translation began in 1835, but as far as we can tell, he only finished the first two chapters in that early period. Then as he studied Hebrew, he gleaned insights into additional Abraham material. It was then in early 1842, having since studied Hebrew, that he revisited the Abraham translation and picked up where he left off. It is in the later Abraham materials — Abraham 3, 4, 5, and in the facsimile explanations (all of which were finalized in Nauvoo) — that we begin to see Joseph as a translator incorporating the material he had learned in his Hebrew class into his final publication of the Book of Abraham.

I think we can identify two or three different ways in which that Hebrew learning or his Hebrew studies impacted that Abraham translation process in Nauvoo.

The first one we can call “Editorial Elucidations.” As he is looking at the facsimiles, which are these Egyptian vignettes and pictures that would accompany the Abraham translation, Joseph gave explanations of what the different images mean. In his explanations, he used Hebrew as a way to help elucidate and pull out meaning from these Egyptian images.

Now today, modern Egyptologists would read those images very differently. However, in the early nineteenth century before an academic understanding of Egyptian was widespread, Joseph seems to have used Hebrew in an attempt to explain the meaning of these Egyptian images for the purposes of his translation project.

That’s category number one in his use of Hebrew: his use of Hebrew vocabulary such as the Hebrew word for heavens (which is “*shumahyeem*”), or the Hebrew word for the expanse or the firmament (which is “*raukeeyang*”), or the Hebrew word for the stars (which is “*kokaubeem*”). These are words that Joseph borrowed from his Hebrew studies and used to explain the Egyptian images.

Laura Harris Hales: These all included Seixas transliterations?

Matthew Grey: They did. Yeah, so when Joseph Smith used these Hebrew words, he spelled them in ways that he was taught by his Hebrew instructor back in Kirtland, with that distinct Sephardic spelling.

In addition to using Hebrew vocabulary to explain Egyptian imagery, he also incorporated Hebrew vocabulary into his translation. For example, in Abraham chapter 3, when Abraham is having a vision about the stars and about the cosmos, once again Joseph Smith as a translator interjected Hebrew vocabulary to help the flow of the narrative, so we see more of those transliterated Hebrew words in that text.

Then, finally, I think the most profound impact that his Hebrew studies had on the translation of Abraham was in the Abrahamic creation account in Abraham Chapters 4 and 5. Joseph knew before studying Hebrew that the Book of Abraham would contain creation material. In early 1842, when he revisited — or at least finalized — the Abrahamic creation

account, it seems that he drew heavily upon the King James Version of Genesis 1–2. Then at key moments, he altered the KJV wording and added insights he received in his Hebrew class, such as the plurality of Gods as a reflection of his translation of the Hebrew word “*elohim*.”

All throughout the Abraham creation story, instead of using the traditional *God created* or *God said*, Joseph translated these passages as *they the Gods created* or *they the Gods said*. I think that’s a really important example of Joseph Smith’s Hebrew insights informing his translation. Another example is in his use of the Hebrew word “*bara*,” which traditionally is translated simply as “to create.” But Joseph, using a more obscure meaning of the word “*bara*,” decided instead to translate that word with the idea of forming pre-existing materials.

Therefore, in the Abraham creation account there is a plurality of Gods forming pre-existing materials, rather than the traditional notion of God creating the heavens and the earth. In these instances we see Joseph’s Hebrew studies impacting his work as a translator in the Book of Abraham.

Laura Harris Hales: Do we see this Hebrew influencing Joseph’s sermons of the Nauvoo period as well?

Matthew Grey: We do, especially in the sermons that are given after the publication of the Book of Abraham in early 1842. Two important examples of doctrinal sermons that reflect a strong influence of Hebrew studies are the King Follett discourse in April of 1844 and another discourse that Joseph gives in June of 1844, not long before his death. In both of these sermons, we see Joseph continuing to develop his thinking on concepts from the book of Abraham, such as the plurality of Gods and the organization of the world through forming pre-existing materials. We see both of these very distinct Mormon concepts that came from the Nauvoo period articulated in sermons that Joseph gave after the Book of Abraham was translated. In the King Follett discourse, for example, Joseph again revisited Genesis 1:1 in Hebrew. But in this case, he offered two or three different ways of translating the Hebrew, all of which, in his mind, unpack theological possibilities.

For example, in the King Follett discourse, he discusses the traditional translation of Genesis 1, being that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Well, Joseph Smith takes some of the insights that

he gained from class and does some very creative reworking of that traditional translation. Instead of saying, “In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth,” Joseph finds in the word “*berosheit*” (“in the beginning”) the word “*rosh*” (“the head”). Then, instead of translating “*bara*” as “create,” he translates it as “form” and instead of translating “*elohim*” as “God,” he translates it as “the Gods.” So whereas traditionally it was, “In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth,” Joseph drew upon some very creative Hebrew insights that he gained from class to translate it as, “The head God brought forth the Council of the Gods along with the Heavens and the Earth.”

This is a very untraditional translation that today no student in a class could get away with. I don’t think any scholars would agree that is the best, most literal reading of that passage. But for Joseph, I don’t think he was trying to give a static, traditional translation. Instead, I think that Joseph was trying in these sermons to mine the Hebrew words, vocabulary, and grammar for theological possibilities.

That’s why I don’t think he ever settled on one definitive translation of Genesis 1:1. I think he was constantly looking for possibilities in the text — possibilities into the plurality of Gods, the Council of Gods, the ways in which they organized the materials and brought forth the heavens and the earth. None of these are traditional Hebrew translations, but they are all instances in which Joseph deferred to more obscure meanings or less conventional ideas for the sake of exploring theological possibilities. This approach to Hebrew grammar and Hebrew vocabulary will end up producing some of the most distinct Mormon teachings from the Nauvoo period regarding the nature of God, the Plan of Salvation, and even the early rituals of the Nauvoo temple.

Laura Harris Hales: This shows us just once again that we really need to think about what Joseph meant about translating and the translation process. It shows us that Joseph Smith viewed his relationship between his prophetic work and his academic studies as interrelated.

Matthew Grey: Yes.

Laura Harris Hales: What part of the Book of Abraham puzzle do you think this gives us?

Matthew Grey: For Joseph Smith, there really was no dichotomy between intellectual endeavors and spiritual endeavors — for him they were actually one in the

same. It shows us some of the mechanics of the Book of Abraham translation process — that at certain points in the translation, Joseph was interested and willing as a translator and as an editor in taking insights that he learned from his academic work and incorporating them into his prophetic translation. In addition to showing us these mechanics, there are several instances in which we can see him borrowing verbiage from his dictionaries and his grammar books, showing that he was clearly intellectually engaged in this process.

I think that the second thing this shows us is that, for Joseph, the essence of prophetic translation wasn't either a static, traditional translation on the one hand or a completely spiritual, supernatural experience on the other, but it was instead a combination of both. This reflects him taking seriously his earlier revelations to “study it out in both your heart and your mind.” We see Joseph interacting with this academic material that for him is going to serve as a catalyst for the unfolding revelatory translation process.

Laura Harris Hales: As a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, does this strike you as very similar to what went on with the prophetic writings in the Old Testament?

Matthew Grey: Yes and no. I know some scholars who have argued that the Book of Abraham translation fits better into categories of pseudepigrapha or even targums or midrash or pesharim, all of which are categories of ancient Jewish scripture writing that was more flexible and more fluid than a static translation. That might be the case, although I'm not sure if any one of those categories are a perfect fit for the Book of Abraham.

Those categories do, however, get at the idea that Joseph's view of translation was much more expansive than we often assume. He was able to take a core concept or a core object of inspiration and expand it in ways that he found relevant in his prophetic capacity and in ways that he found to be important and enlightening, even if it went beyond what he thought was on the text. I think it was a very fluid, expansive translation process that might find some kind of analogy in the earlier models of inspired targums or inspired expansions of a biblical text. I'm not sure if those are perfect analogies, but they may provide a possible framework for understanding Joseph's approach to translation.

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