

Problems with the Book of Abraham

Unfortunately, most discussions about the history of the Book of Abraham are confusing, filled with words like “papyrus” and “facsimiles” and “fragments” without knowing the whole story.

There’s a hazy understanding that we had the papyri but then they were burned at some point in a museum(?), and then parts of it (or all of it?) were found later again somehow.

Here’s the thing: **Anybody** can understand what happened with the Book of Abraham, what has been recovered.

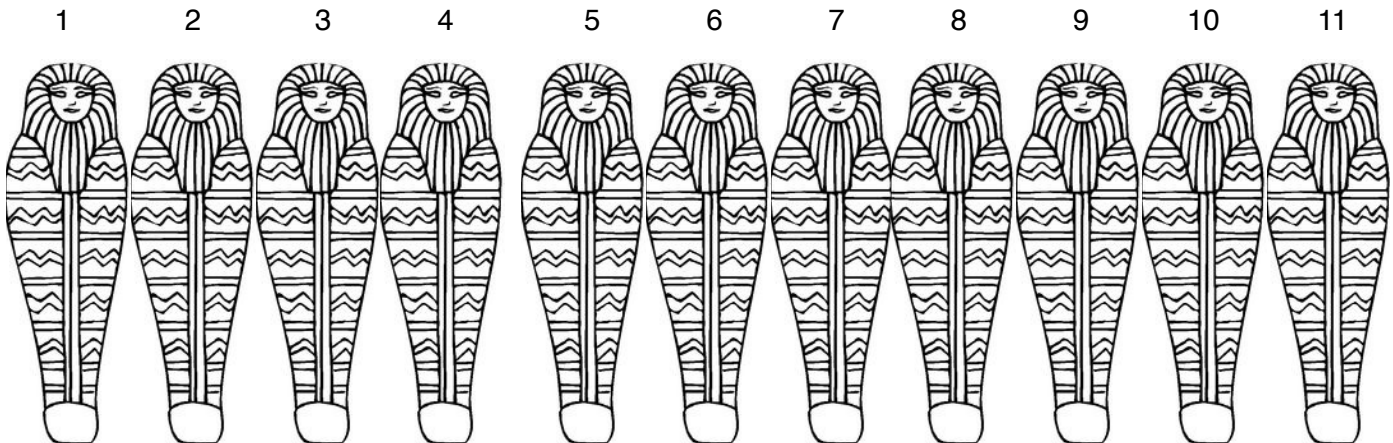
You don’t have to be an Egyptologist or a PhD to understand the main issues, and their implications.

I promise you. So let’s go over a few quick things to do with its origin, what happened, and what the issues are.

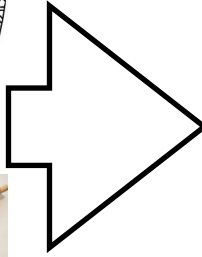
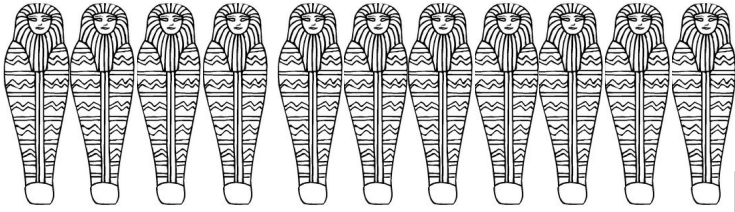
A lot of the smaller details of its history have conflicting details - I would love any correction if needed and sources!

A. The Story!

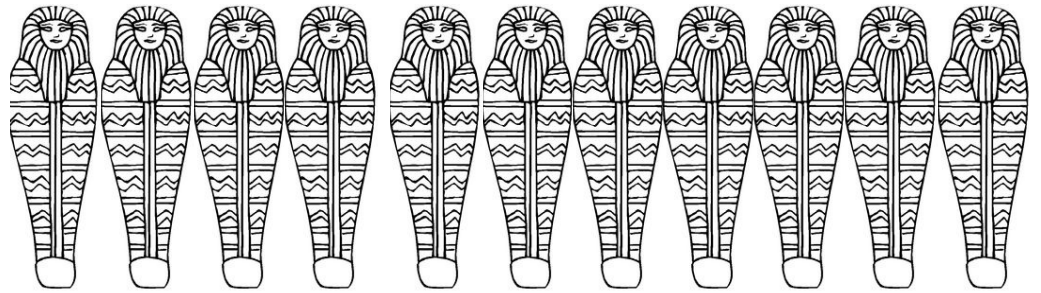
In 1818-1822, an Italian Archaeologist named Antonio Lebolo discovers 11 mummies, with scrolls in the same rooms, in Egypt.



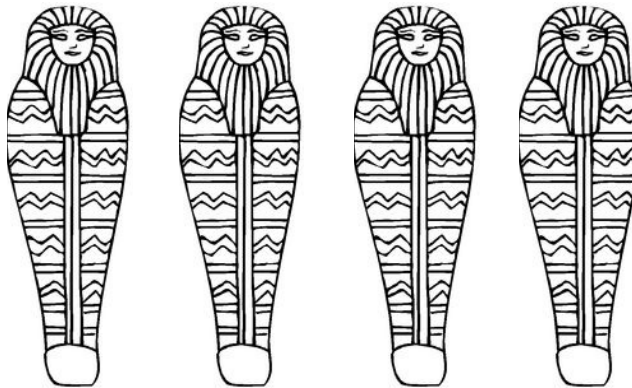
By 1830, the collection ends up in NYC!



In 1833, an entrepreneur named Michael Chandler is commissioned to sell this collection of 11 mummies and scrolls.



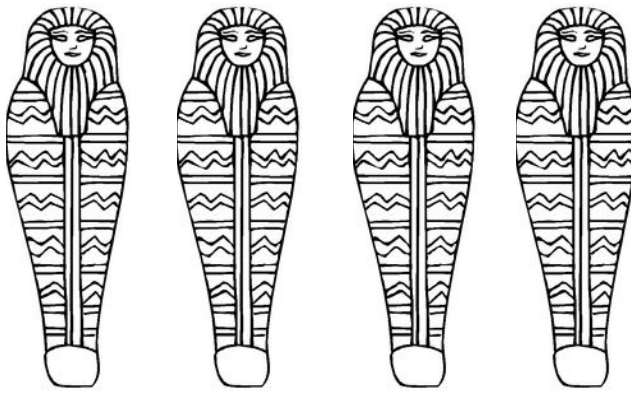
Two years later in 1835, only **FOUR** mummies are left and **TWO** scrolls.



1 2 3 4



This is the collection that Michael Chandler has with him when he visits Kirtland OH in July 1835 and displays it for the Prophet Joseph Smith



Joseph proclaims the scrolls contain writings of Abraham and Joseph! The remainder of the collection is purchased for the Church.

From July to November of 1835, Joseph and his associates work to preserve the scrolls as best as possible.

The thing is, the *ends* of the scrolls are **fragmented**

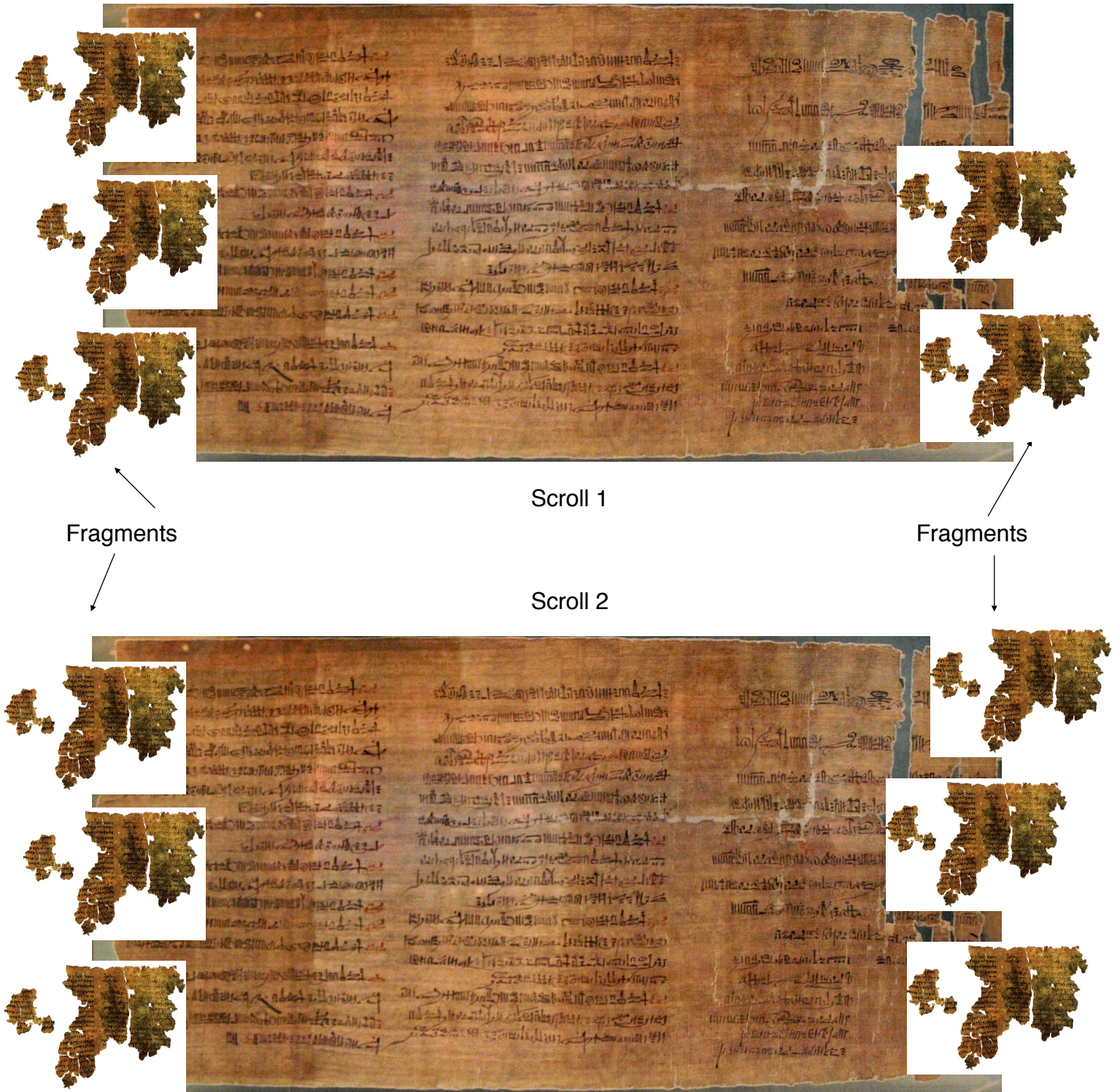
Kind of like this



And there are a bunch of separated fragments at the ends, which could be either (1) the end tips of the scrolls that were separated, and/or (2) fragments of other stuff that wasn't from the main two scrolls



So if you were to open the two scrolls completely on a table, the gist of it would look something like this:



Again, it was just a bunch of fragments at the ends that were either broken off from the main scroll, or were writings from something else where the mummies were discovered.

Got it so far? If not, give the past 4 pages a quick scan-through again. It's super simple - once you do that, let's move on!



So in order to preserve those separated fragments on the ends, Joseph decided to paste them against stiff paper on their backs.



This is actually one of them! Pasted onto stiff paper

In the years that follow, Joseph translates and publishes the Book of Abraham in the Times and Seasons. The mummies and the Papyri are exhibited in the Smith's Nauvoo home.

After Joseph's death, his mother Lucky Mack Smith keeps the artifacts in Nauvoo, showing them frequently to guests (1844-1856).

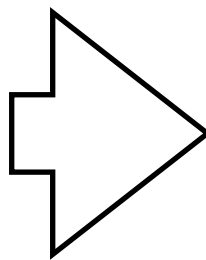
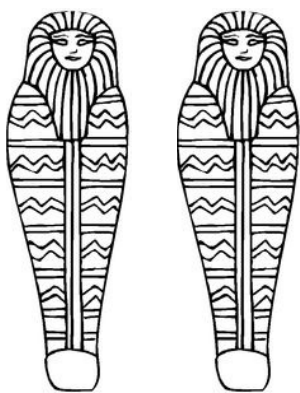
Then in 1856, Emma Smith sells the collection to a guy named ABEL COMBS.

You with me so far?

So that year Abel Combs sells the two scrolls, and two of the mummies, to Wyman's Museum.



Abel Combs



Wyman's Museum
(Actually it's a picture of a random museum I found...but again, it looks authentic, right?)



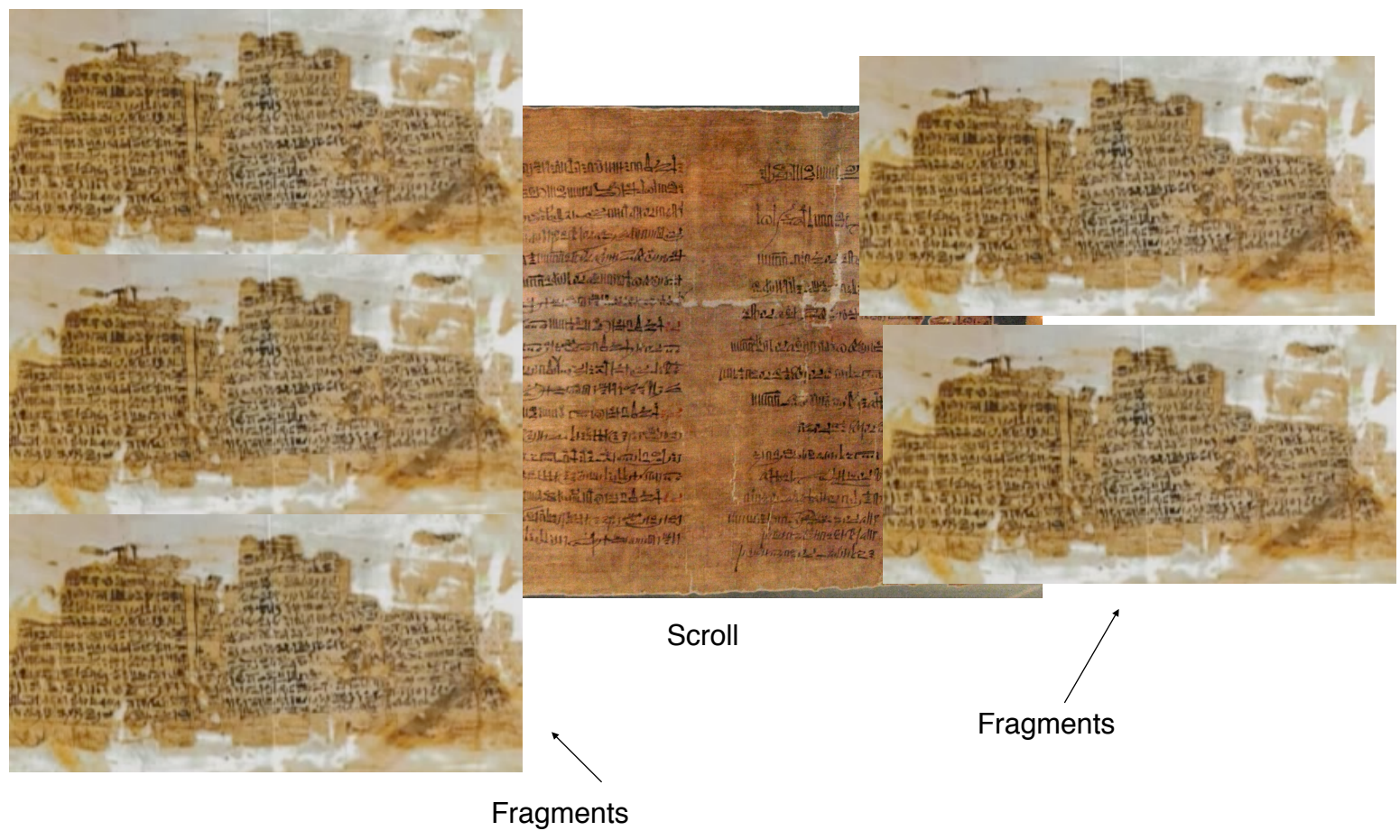
(Actually it's a picture of a random guy I found...but it looks authentic, right?)

But remember the fragments? That were pasted onto stiff paper, like this one on the right? Combs had **10** of these things. And he did **NOT** sell those to the museum.



And it's interesting, because as we'll see later, there is evidence that the fragments of one of the two scrolls were bigger/longer than the actual scroll itself!

So in actuality, it would have been something more like:



Moving on - so then, the Wyman Museum moved to Chicago, IL in 1863.

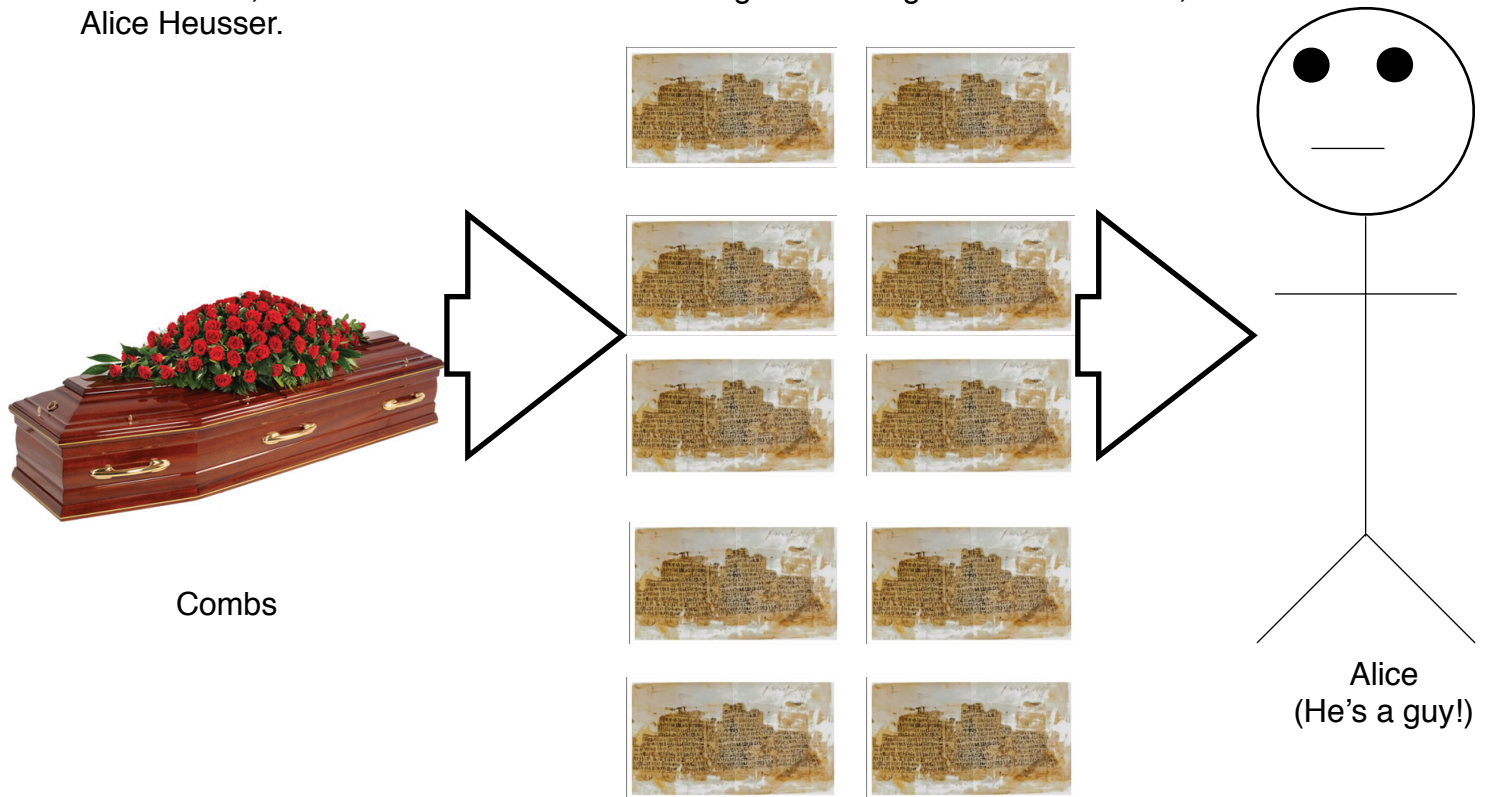
When the worst thing that could happen to a museum happened - it caught on fire! It was during the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.



So the two mummies and the two scrolls that Abel Combs sold are burned up in the Great Chicago Fire.

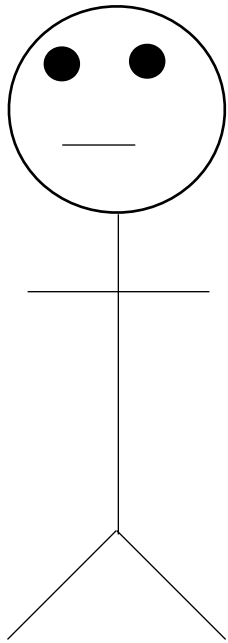
But remember, he has **10** fragments that were mounted onto stiff paper with him still! They were originally rolled up on ends of the scrolls before they were separated and mounted onto stiff paper.

And in 1892, Combs dies. The 10 mounted fragments are given to his servant, Mr. Alice Heusser.



Ok, almost done! Deep breaths everyone.

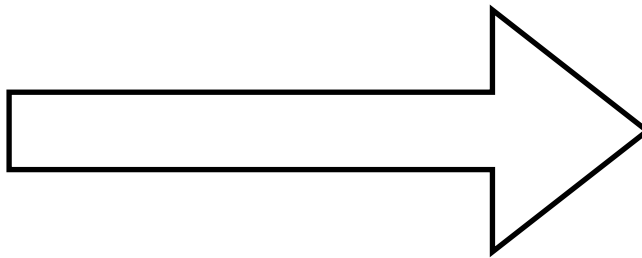
So by 1947, Alice Huesser's **NEPHEW** has the 10 fragments. (And two World Wars have passed... but you know, details)



Yo. I'm Alice Huesser's Nephew. Can you see the resemblance?

And Alice Huesser's nephew sells the fragments to the **MUSEUM OF MODERN ART in NYC.**

I guess he just wanted to sell it to whoever would buy it - a man's gotta pay his bills, you know what I'm saying?



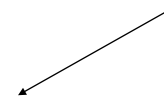
And so those remaining 10 mounted fragments stayed undiscovered, like a secret stash of museum secrets from the Indiana Jones movies



UNTIL...



This is an actual picture of the actual guy



In 1966, Arabic Professor Dr Aziz Atiya from the University of Utah learns of the surviving 10 fragments that are hanging out at the Metropolitan Museum of Art! You see...**everyone** thought that the fragments were burned in the Chicago Fire!



What people thought was burned in the fire:

- The two mummies
- The two Main scrolls
- The 10 Fragments



What actually burned:

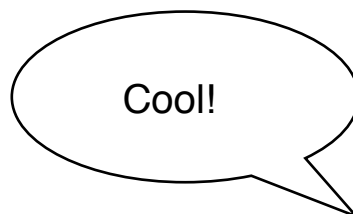
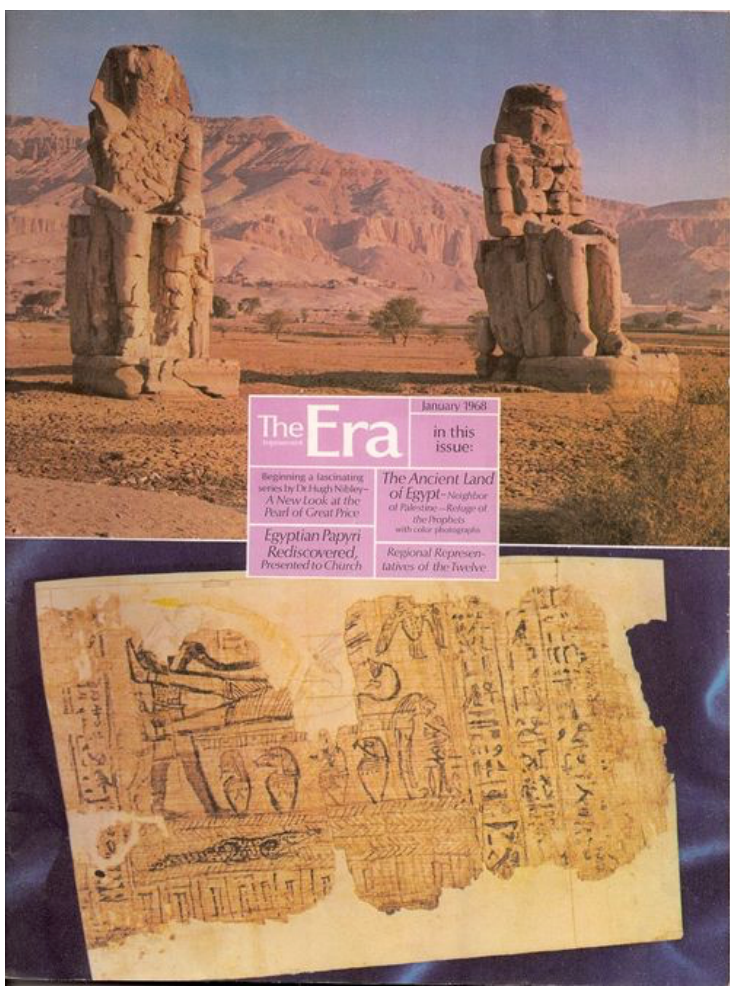
- The two mummies
- The two Main scrolls

What survived:

- The 10 fragments!



And so, in 1967, The LDS Church acquires the 10 fragments. And in 1968, it publishes the photographs of the 10 fragments **plus** an 11th fragment they had from the Church Archives, in the Improvement Era!



I know!



A. The Questions!

You made it!

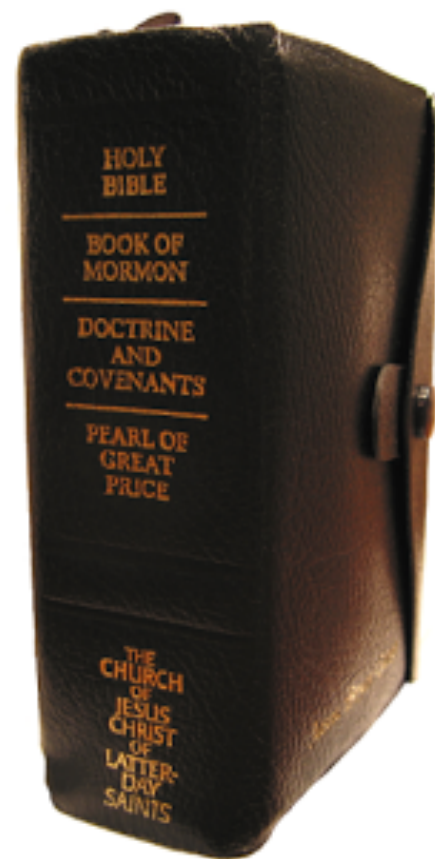
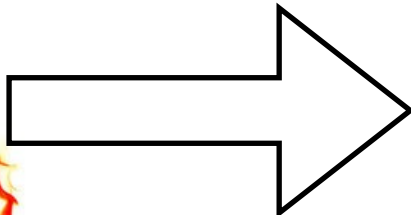
You now know more about the *history* of the Book of Abraham, and how we got it, than most of your fellow Ward members.

So the real question is: Now that we have the 10 Fragments back (plus an 11th that the Church had stored in its Archives), do any of them have anything that is actually in our scriptures, in the Book of Abraham?

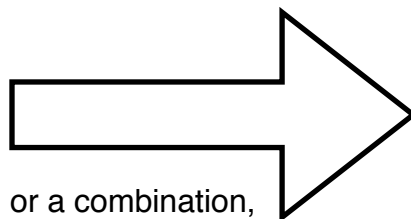
Or did Joseph translate from one of the two main scrolls that were burned in the fire, and the fragments are just extra stuff that didn't have anything to do with the Book of Abraham? Or a combination of both?



The long lost two main scrolls that were burned



OR



One, or a combination, of the mounted fragments?



Well, take a look for yourself at one of the fragments....does anything look familiar?



Yup! We have frigging facsimile 1! You can even see where Joseph or an assistant drew in where the “Lacuna” is (“Lacuna” is a fancy word for a tear in an Egyptian scroll, like the one in the fragment going down to where the arms would be).

There’s a problem though. I’ll let the First-Presidency approved Essay on this topic explain (I have so far said nothing on this subject that any faithful member would disagree with!):

“None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mentioned Abraham’s name or any of the events recorded in the book of Abraham. Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the book of Abraham, though there is not unanimity, even among non-Mormon scholars, about the proper interpretation of the vignettes on these fragments.²⁷ Scholars have identified the papyrus fragments as parts of standard funerary texts that were deposited with mummified bodies. These fragments date to between the third century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., long after Abraham lived.”

-LDS Church Essay, *“Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham”*
<https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>



Wait...The Church openly admits that none of the remaining fragments have anything to do with the Book of Abraham...Well then that obviously means that he got the text from one of the two scrolls that burned down.

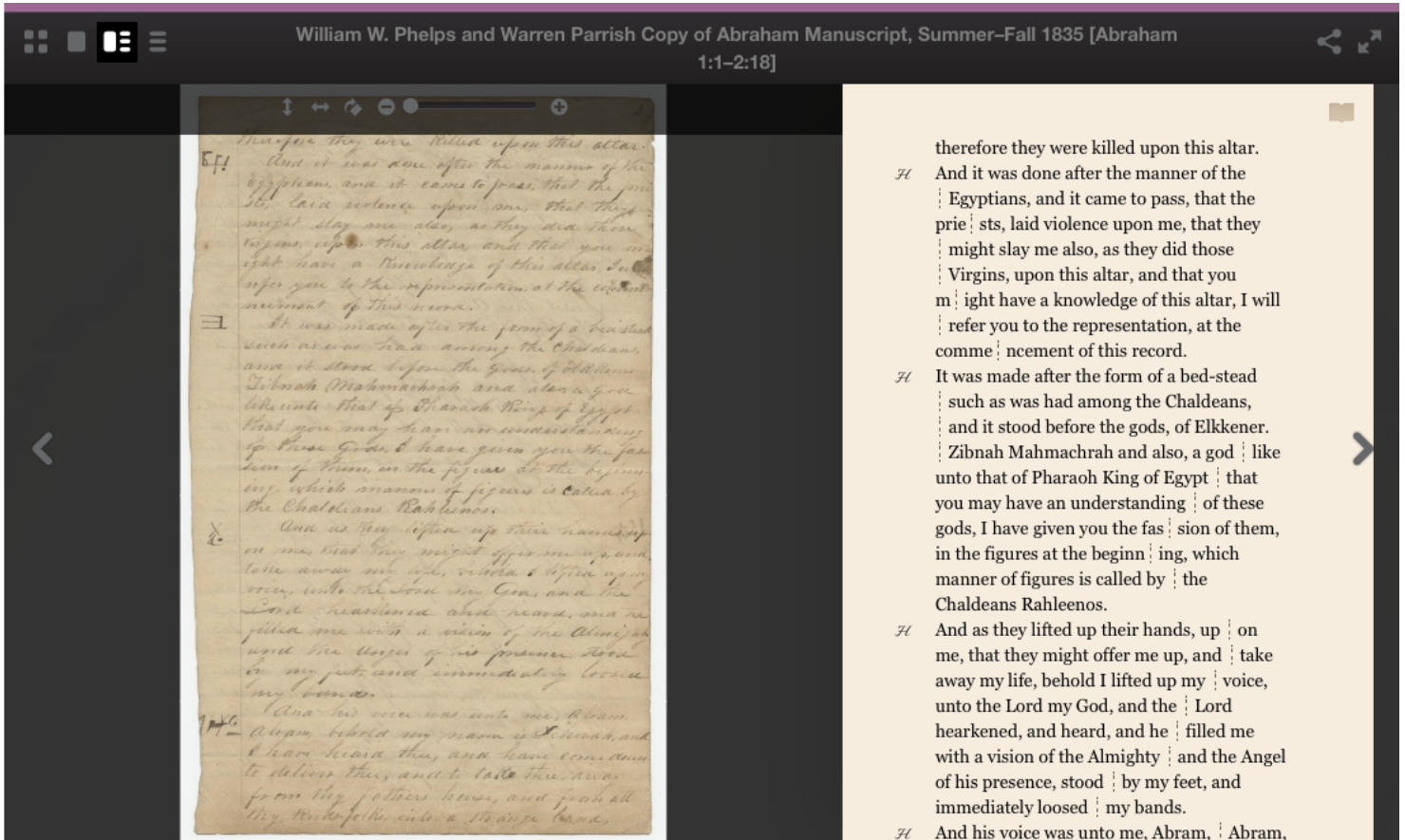
PAUSE

Take a moment and breath. It starts to get really bad from here on in.

So Joseph had a journal where he and his scribes wrote down literal translations for hieroglyphs.

It's called "**Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language**", and comes in a collection of other documents of his translations.

It looks like this:



You can find this freely available on the Joseph Smith Papers project:

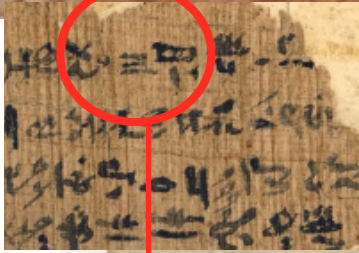
<http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/william-w-phelps-and-warren-parrish-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-summer-fall-1835-abraham-11-218&p=2>

Notice how it's the book of Abraham verses that are being translated on the right?

Let's take a closer look.

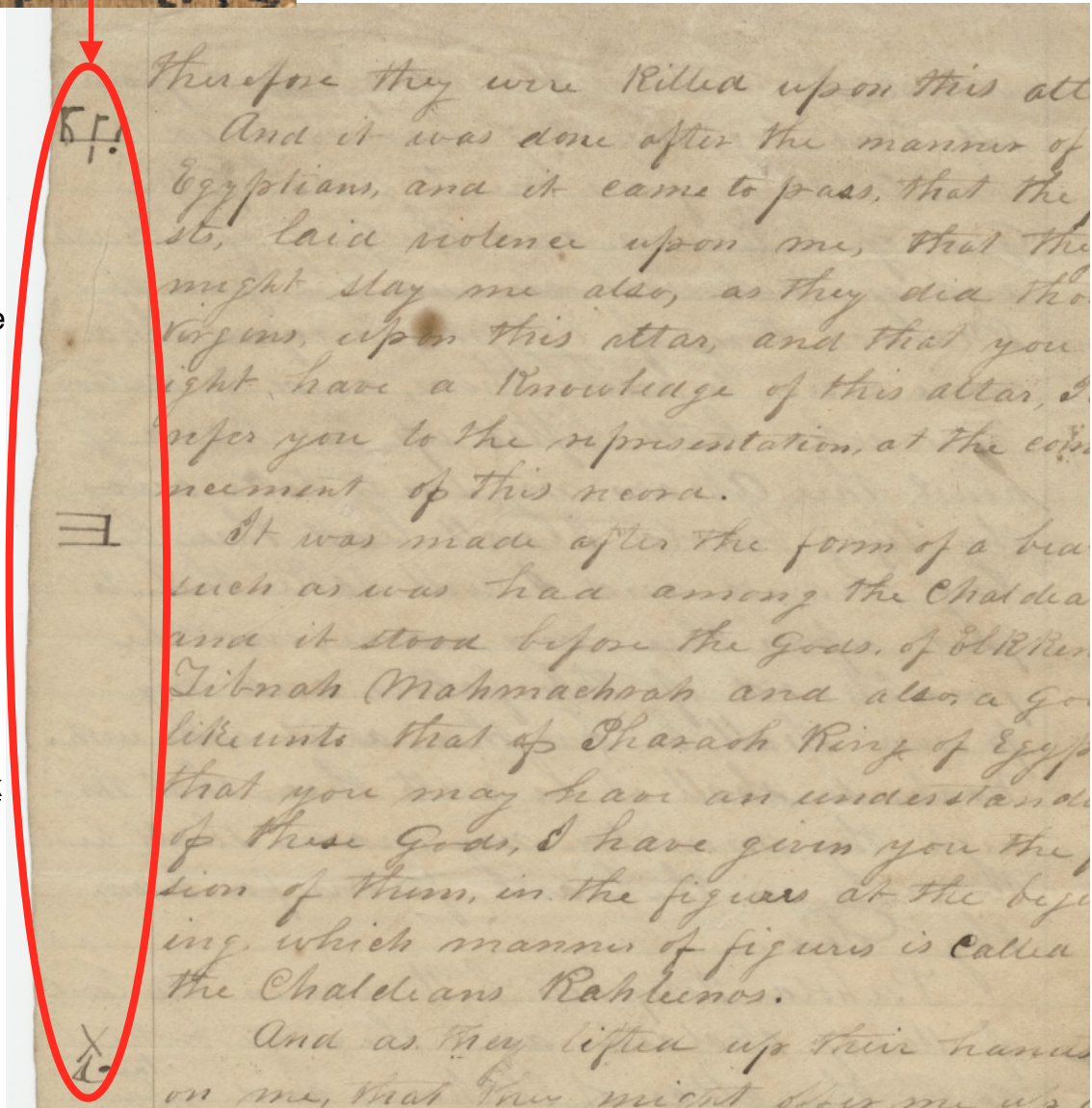


Let's look Right Here



Facsimile 1

Reading right to left, they are the **SAME** symbols in the **SAME** order on this surviving fragment that we have. There are **pages and pages of translations by Joseph**, that follow the **sequence of these hieroglyphs perfectly**, and he translates them into the Book of Abraham verses in this journal. And the Church says: **“None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mentioned Abraham’s name or any of the events recorded in the book of Abraham. Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the book of Abraham”**



His translation was wrong. We even know through science how long this fragment was, down to several centimetres - so it's impossible that Joseph could have gotten any of the Book of Abraham from a "missing portion" of the Papyrus fragment.

- (1) <https://dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/The-Original-Length-of-the-Scroll-of-Hor.pdf>
- (2) Klaus Baer study, 1968

And it even says in the Book itself: "The writings of Abraham... written by his own hand, upon papyrus" and "that you may have an understanding of these gods, I have given you the fashion of them in the figures at the beginning". So according to the text itself, the purpose for the inclusion of the facsimiles was to help us in the understanding of Egyptian Gods as well.

And by the way, the Church has officially spoken about Joseph's translations, when he tried to create an alphabet of the Egyptian language:

"Neither the rules nor the translations in the grammar book correspond to those recognized by Egyptologists today."
-LDS Essay on the Book of Abraham

Not. One. Translation. was correct. And you can see them all in his and his scribe's writings on the Joseph Smith Papers link above.

So to summarize:
We know the Book of Abraham was translated from this fragment, **which seems to be a majority surviving piece of one of the main scrolls that was burned in the fire:**



The Book of Breathings ends with this facsimile. We don't have the original, but it's facsimile #3 in the Book of Abraham

Other adjacent surviving fragment



The Church provides a theory as to how Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Abraham, while admitting that he got everything wrong at the same time. It's called the Catalyst Theory. I'll let them explain from the Essay:

“...**illustrations with no clear connection to Abraham** anciently could, by revelation, shed light on the life and teachings of this prophetic figure....Joseph’s study of the papyri may have led to a revelation about key events and teachings in the life of Abraham, much as he had earlier received a revelation about the life of Moses while studying the Bible. This view assumes a broader definition of the words *translator* and *translation*.³³ According to this view, **Joseph’s translation was not a literal rendering of the papyri as a conventional translation would be. Rather, the physical artifacts provided an occasion for meditation, reflection, and revelation.** They catalyzed a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation about the life of Abraham, even if that revelation did not directly correlate to the characters on the papyri.”

But doesn't this explanation, that Joseph just needed a physical catalyst to receive “inspiration”, and that that means he “translated” it, fly in the face of all the evidence?

He clearly shows to believe he could translate Egyptian! Look at these quotes from his journal:

“**Spent the day in translation Egyptian characters from the papyrus**” HOC 2:320, 26 Nov 1835

“**The record of Abraham and Joseph**, found with the mummies, is beautifully written on papyrus” HOC 2:348, 350-351. 31 Dec 1835

“As Mr. Chandler had been told I [JS] could **translate** them, he brought me **some of the characters, and I gave him the interpretation**” HOC 2:235. July 3-6, 1835

“The remainder of this month, I [JS] was continually engaged in **translating an alphabet of the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients**” HOC 2:238, July 1835

Clearly Joseph believed he was literally translating the Book of Abraham, and not just receiving inspiration-revelation. Am I wrong on this?

So if Joseph believed he was translating Egyptian, and got it all wrong, and the Church admits he got it all wrong, then what does that say about his ability as Prophet, Seer, and Revelator? What about the Book of Mormon?

And down the Rabbit hole we go.

In the future I will address more difficult issues, including the “But how can you explain my very powerful and specific spiritual experiences? I cannot deny them!” question.

In the meantime, I invite anyone to point out any flaws in my facts so that I can correct them!

