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The Curious Textual History of “Egyptus” the Wife of Ham

Brent Lee Metcalfe

*Whats in a name? That which we call a Rose,
By any other name would smell as sweet:*

—Juliet¹

HER STORY EMERGES from the depths of Joseph Smith’s Abrahamic narrative. Her name would portend the mystique of her vast, royal descendants who formed a populous, influential civilization, while her husband’s name—“Ham,” son of diluvian patriarch Noah—would drown in infamy.

In Smith’s prophetic lexicon, her name signifies “Egypt,” which in turn signifies “that which is forbidden.” But what *is* her name? Beginning with the initial printing in 1842,² published versions of Smith’s Book of Abraham call her “Egyptus” (Abr. 1:23); however, in the manuscript drafts, that wasn’t always the case, not even *mostly* the case. Textual criticism of Abraham 1:23, 25 illuminates the peculiar way Ham’s wife eventually acquired her name.

Times and Seasons 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 705 (¶ 7a); Abraham 1:23, 25:

The land of Egypt being first discovered by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham, and the daughter of Egyptus, which, in the Chaldea, signifies Egypt, which signifies, that which is forbidden.

...

1. William Shakespeare, *An Excellent Conceited Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet* (London: John Danter, 1597), quire D, lines 50–51.

2. The Book of Abraham and accompanying facsimile vignettes (with interpretations) were first published serially in *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 703 (Facsimile 1), 704–06 (Abr. 1:1–2:18); 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): 719–22 (Abr. 2:19–5:21), insert between 720–21 (Facsimile 2); 3, no. 14 (May 16, 1842): 783–84 (Facsimile 3).

Now the first government of Egypt was established by Pharaoh, the eldest son of Egyptus, the daughter of Ham, and it was after the manner of the government of Ham, which was Patriarchal.

Smith's Book of Abraham opens with its protagonist recounting his quest for the patriarchal priesthood, a priestly order originating with Adam that is a "right" conferred upon each successive generation (Abr. 1:1–3). Abraham becomes "a rightful heir, a High Priest" (v.2). Persecution ensues because of his condemnation of idolatry. Echoing God's grim test of Abraham's fidelity (Gen. 22:1ff), Abraham, bound upon an altar, petitions heaven as an Egyptian priest wields a blade over him. God delivers Abraham, destroying the sacrificial bier and heathen idols and killing the priest (Abr. 1:12–17, 20, 29; Fac. 1).³

Toward the end of the opening chapter, Abraham interrupts his autobiographical sketch with an analepsis about Pharaoh's regal lineage and Egypt's humble beginnings (Abr. 1:20b–27). In the aftermath of the great deluge, Noah's granddaughter through Ham settles her sons in a land that she had previously discovered while it was submerged (v. 24).⁴ Her eldest son creates a government that simulates the

3. Comparing these themes to extrabiblical Abrahamic legends in support of Book of Abraham antiquity is misguided. Claims such as "The majority of these nonbiblical traditions were not available to the Prophet Joseph Smith during his lifetime" are irrelevant since numerous antebellum publications recounted extrabiblical Abrahamic legends, if not the specific sources that Mormon scholars have compiled. John A. Tvedtnes, Brian Hauglid, and John Gee, comps. and eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), xxxv, and passim. LDS historian Andrew Hedges avers that among a selection of Bible commentators from Smith's day, "None of these commentators mentioned the available traditions concerning attempts to sacrifice Abraham himself." Andrew H. Hedges, "A Wanderer in a Strange Land: Abraham in America, 1800–1850," *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian Hauglid (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 186. Hedges is contradicted by one of his chief commentators, Matthew Henry:

The Jewish writers have a tradition that Abram was cast into the fiery furnace for refusing to worship idols, and was miraculously delivered.... Thence God brought him by an effectual call; brought him with a gracious violence; snatched him as a brand out of the burning.

Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (Philadelphia: Towar & Hogan, 1828), sv Genesis 15:7; see also sv Daniel 3:27 where Henry again mentions the "tradition of the Jews" about the attempted immolation of Abraham and his subsequent deliverance.

Another of Hedges's silent commentators on the sacrifice/execution motif, Adam Clarke, was actually one of the more observant expositors of this tradition. For instance:

The *Targum* applies this to Abraham. "Abraham ... refused to worship the idols which ... Nimrod, had set up; therefore, Nimrod cast him into a furnace of fire. But the Lord worked a miracle, and delivered him...."

Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible ... with a Commentary and Critical Notes* (New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory, 1826), sv Ecclesiastes 4:13; see also sv 2 Chronicles 28:3, sv "The Targum, or Chaldee paraphrase, on the Song of Songs" 7:8(m), sv Isaiah 30:23, sv Daniel 3:6.

Contra Hedges, such Abrahamic traditions were commonly circulated in Smith's environment, even in sources that Hedges alleges did not include them.

4. Being "under water" (Abr. 1:26) may refer to the Noachian flood or a "land overflown by the seasons" as alluded to in Smith's Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language (GAEL), 5, sv "Iota toues Zip Zi." The GAEL is

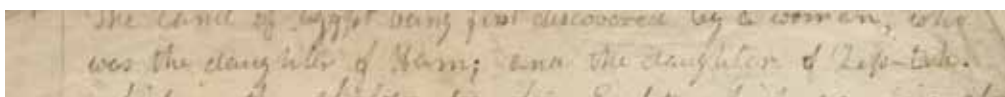
patriarchal order; the land is called Egypt and he is called Pharaoh (v. 25). He is a righteous, wise, and just king, a partaker of earthly or kingly blessings, but he is the progeny of a cursed lineage that has lost the "right" to the priestly order (vv. 26–27).⁵

From Matriarch Zeptah ...

Unlike the Bible, Smith's Abrahamic narrative identifies Ham's wife and their daughter, Noah's daughter-in-law and granddaughter, each by name—or names. In the earliest manuscript drafts of the Book of Abraham, transcribed in 1835,⁶ the mother and daughter do not share a common name, nor do either of them have the same name as it appears in the published version.

In the two earliest manuscripts, *BA*^{1a} (Frederick G. Williams scribe)⁷ and *BA*^{1b} (Warren Parrish scribe),⁸ Ham's wife is dubbed **Zep-tah** or **Zeptah**.⁹

BA^{1a} 3,3



was the daughter of Ham{,±;} and the daughter of Zep-tah.

available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/grammar-and-alphabet-of-the-egyptian-language-circa-july-circa-december-1835#!/paperSummary/grammar-and-alphabet-of-the-egyptian-language-circa-july-circa-december-1835&p=1>.

5. Cf. "A prince of the royal blood a true descendant from Ham, the son of Noah, and inheritor of the Kingly blessings from under the hand of Noah, but not according to the priestly blessing, because of the transgressions of Ham, which fell upon Shem from under the hand of Noah" (GAEL, 4, sv "Ho-e-ooop"); "honor by birth, kingly power by the line of Pharaoh, possession by birth one who reigns upon his throne universally — possessor of heaven and earth, and of the blessings of the earth" (GAEL, 4–5, sv "Ho e oop hah").

Pharaoh's "curse" specifically involves an ancestral male "right" to priesthood—a *patriarchal* priesthood. His lack of "right" is further accentuated by his regal connection to Ham via his *mother*, an invalid *matrilineal* claim to patriarchal authority. If Smith applied Pharaoh's "curse" to males of African descent, this may elucidate Smith's admittance of blacks to Mormonism's other two priesthoods—Aaronic and Melchizedek—prior to Brigham Young's sweeping priesthood restriction on black males.

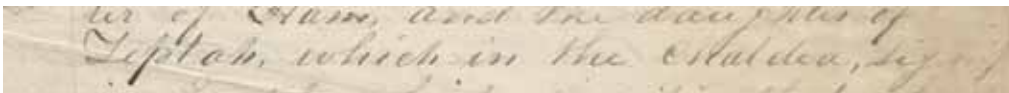
6. Book of Abraham manuscript designations in this essay generally follow those proposed by Edward H. Ashment. See hypernote 7 in "Abraham in the Breathing Permit of Hór (pJSi)," <http://www.mormonscriptur-studies.com/boabr/eha/abrhor.asp#7hn>.

7. *BA*^{1a} is available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/frederick-g-williams-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-circa-october-1835-abraham-14-26#!/paperSummary/frederick-g-williams-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-circa-october-1835-abraham-14-26&p=1>.

8. *BA*^{1b} is available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/warren-parrish-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-fall-1835-abraham-14-22#!/paperSummary/warren-parrish-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-fall-1835-abraham-14-22&p=1>.

9. For a key to the manuscript transcription symbols used in this essay, see appendix 1.

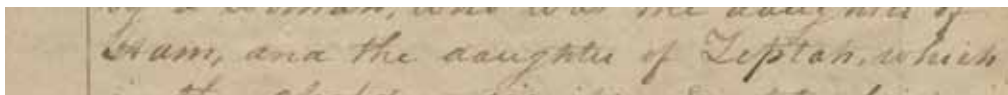
BA^{1b} 4.23



Zeptah, which in the Chaldea, signif-

When Parrish copied the text of *BA*^{1a} and *BA*^{1b} into *BA*²,¹⁰ he retained his spelling of the name:

*BA*² 5.4



Ham, and the daughter of Zeptah, which

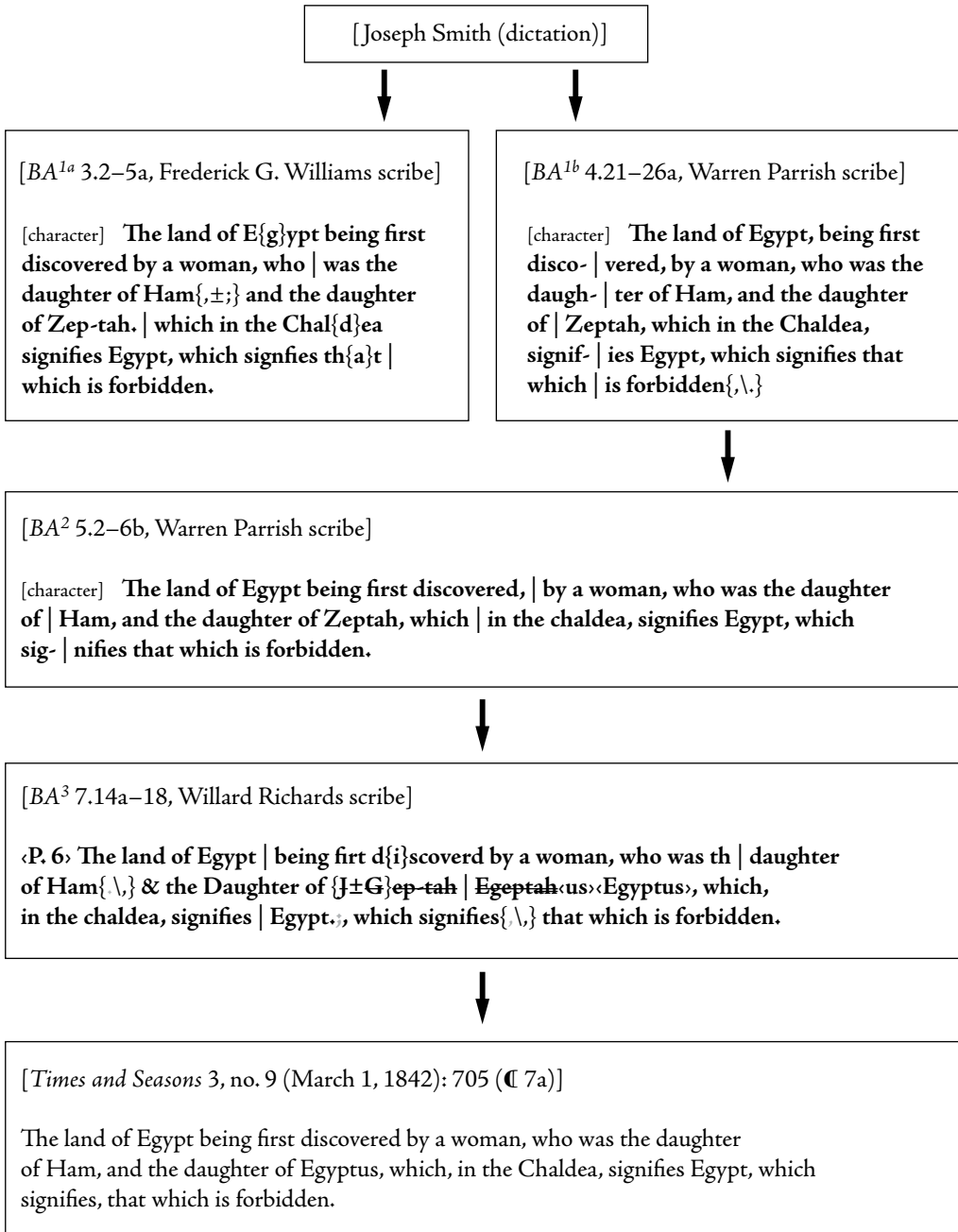
The name of Ham and Zeptah's daughter is consistently spelled **Egyptes** in all three of the 1835 manuscripts transcribed in Kirtland (*BA*^{1a}, *BA*^{1b}, and *BA*²). In Nauvoo, that would change.

Table 1 shows the general stemmatic relationship among the manuscripts for the textual history of Abraham 1:23.¹¹

10. *BA*² is available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/william-w-phelps-and-warren-parrish-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-summer-fall-1835-abraham-11-218#!/paperSummary/william-w-phelps-and-warren-parrish-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-summer-fall-1835-abraham-11-218&p=1>.

11. An analysis of the nuances and caveats inherent in this textual stemma is beyond the scope of this essay.

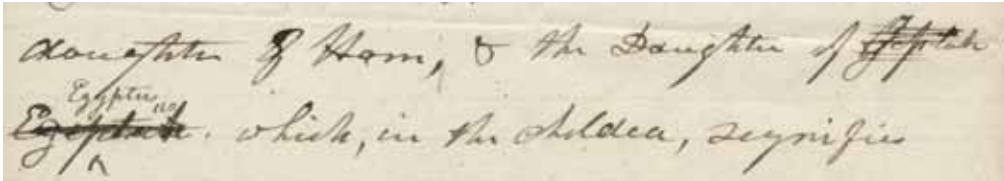
Table 1
Abraham 1:23—Textual History



... to Matriarch Egyptus

In 1842, when Smith and his scribe Willard Richards created a printer's manuscript (*BA*³)¹² in preparation for publishing the Book of Abraham, Smith redacted his 1835 text in several instances, including Zephtah's name:

*BA*³ 7.16–17



daughter of Ham{. \,} & the Daughter of {J±G}ep-tah

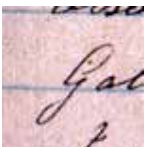
Egyptus
us
Egeptah, which, in the chaldaea, signifies

Curiously, Richards doesn't transcribe the matriarch's name with an initial **Z**. Instead, he transcribes her name with an initial letter that most closely resembles one of his letterforms for an uppercase **J** as in **Jep-tah**. Richards then changes the **J** (possibly before fully writing the **J**) to a **G** by overwriting the small ascender hook/loop of the **J** with an elongated loop.¹³

Although some scholars render the initial letter of the name as "Z" (following the earlier manuscripts), Richards's uppercase **J** letterforms are distinct from his uppercase **Z** letterforms.¹⁴

12. *BA*³ is available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/willard-richards-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-early-1842-a-abraham-11-218#!/paperSummary/willard-richards-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-early-1842-a-abraham-11-218&p=1>.

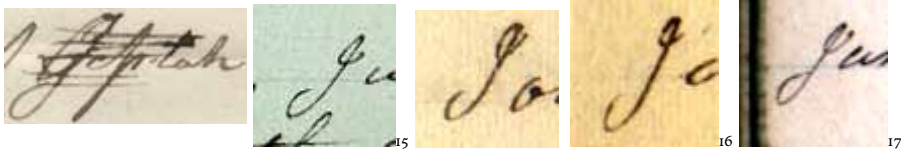
13. The elongated loop resembles the ascender loop in this style of Richards's uppercase **G**:



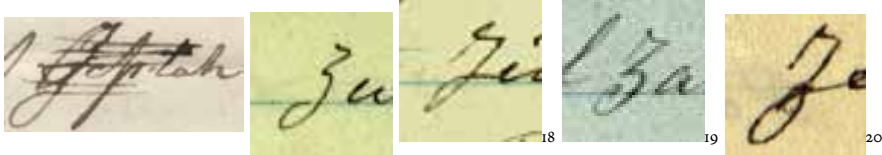
"Gallands" in Joseph Smith Journal, January 20, 1842, available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842#!/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842&p=13>.

14. {J±G}ep-tah is rendered "{∅|Z}ep-tah" in Brian M. Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 167, and "Zep-tah" on The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed on July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/willard-richards-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-early-1842-a-abraham-11-218#!/paperSummary/willard-rich>

Willard Richards, uppercase J



Willard Richards, uppercase Z



Richards's shift from **J** to **G** suggests that the phoneme was pronounced as a soft /g/, as in *gin* or *giant* or the medial *g* in *Egypt*.²¹ This spelling adjustment brought the

ards-copy-of-abraham-manuscript-early-1842-a-abraham-11-218&p=11. Cf. “Jephthah” in Judges 11:iff; alternative nineteenth-century spellings of the name included “Jeptrah” in Arthur O’Leary, *Essays and Tracts of the Rev. Arthur O’Leary* (Lewistown, PA: Charles Bell & Sons, 1832), 100; “Jeptha” in Andrew Bigelow, *God’s Charge unto Israel: A Sermon Preached before his Honor Samuel T. Armstrong* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1836), 37; and “Jepthe” in *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (Utica, NY: William Williams, 1835), Hebrews 11:32.

Richards had multiple letterforms for both his uppercase *J* and *Z*, but the graphetic convergence between the two is superficial at best—akin to equating nickels and dimes.

15. “July” in Joseph Smith to John Bernhisel, January 4, 1842, Letterbook 2, 221, available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/letterbook-2#!/paperSummary/letterbook-2&p=226>.

16. This and the previous *J* are each the initial letter in “Joseph” in Joseph Smith Journal, March 11, 1843, available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843#!/paperSummary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843&p=13>.

17. “January” in Joseph Smith Journal, January 4, 1842, available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842#!/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842&p=10>.

18. This and the previous *Z* are each the initial letter in “Zion” in Joseph Smith Journal, January 6, 1842, available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842#!/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842&p=10>.

19. “Zarahemla” in Joseph Smith Journal, December (n.d.), 1841, available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842?p=12#!/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842&p=6>.

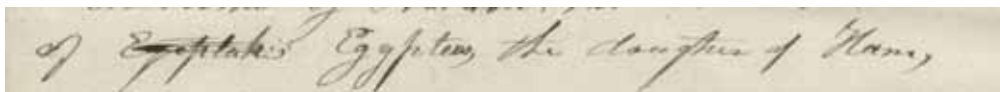
20. “Zenith” in Joseph Smith Journal, March 10, 1843, available online, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843?p=10#!/paperSummary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843&p=10>.

21. This and other instances of transcription variations from the 1835 drafts hint at orality, suggesting that Smith may have read and audibly revised portions of earlier manuscripts to Richards as they composed the printer’s

name closer to its next variation, **Egeptah**, and closer to the name of her daughter, **Egeptes**—whose name was about to go through a few adjustments of its own that would eventually lead to the final iteration of her mother's name.

But after her name's evolution **Zep-tah/Zeptah** → **Jep-tah** → **Gep-tah** → **Egeptah**, what prompted the final variation **Egyptus**? The evolution of her daughter's name provides an answer.

BA³ 8.6



of **Egepta{h}**'s **Egypt{es±\u}**s, the daughter of Ham,

To understand the interrelationship of the mother and daughter's names it's necessary to peel back the transcriptional layers of the redaction sequence. Table 2 delineates the complexity of the text-critical data.

The order of transcriptional layers ^[01] and ^[02] are uncertain because there is no chirographic or ink evidence that can determine whether the **J** was altered to form **G** before or after the rest of the name was transcribed. This is compounded by the lack of a connecting stroke to the medial **e**. But the alteration was made before the name was canceled via strikethrough in ^[03] because the addition of **Egeptah** and the cancelation of **{J±G}ep-tah** via strikethrough in ^[04] are inline redactions, meaning they were made before Richards continued on with his transcription.

After making those redactions to the mother's name, Richards transcribed several more lines, and then he came to the daughter's name. Richards writes **Egeptah** in ^[05] just like her mother's revised name, but the earlier manuscripts transcribe her name as **Egyptes**, so in ^[06] Richards awkwardly adds an apostrophe *s* (**Egeptah's**).²² This rendition is quickly abandoned in ^[07] when Richards cancels the name via strikethrough before he adds a crossbar to the medial **t**, and he replaces the name with **Egyptes**, the spelling in all of the previous drafts.

manuscript. This may explain the almost frenetic pace at which Richards appears to be transcribing the text, which exhibits chirographic features not found in other manuscripts where he is visually copying.

22. Richards may have written **Egeptah's** in one transcriptional layer with ^[05]. What makes this rendition particularly interesting is that Richards spells the daughter's name like her mother's revised name (**Egeptah**) but then artificially forms the *es* vocalization in the earlier **Egyptes** by adding an apostrophe *s*. Again, this may be evidence that portions of Richards's transcription involved hearing someone read in lieu of visually copying. Indeed, that the redactions continue lends credence to this.

Some may be tempted to see the anomalous stroke on the shoulder of the **h** in **Egeptah's** as a feeble effort to form the eye of a potential *e* (as in the *es* ending in **Egyptes**). And while that's a remote possibility, not every scribal mark is an attempt to shape or reshape a letterform—sometimes an anomalous stroke is just an anomalous stroke.

Then comes transcription layer ^[08]. Now that the daughter's name has been restored to its original form it undergoes one more redaction—Richards overwrites the terminal *s* in *es* with a small vertical stroke that now along with the closed eye of the *e* forms a *u* and he appends a new terminal *s* to spell **Egyptus**. This was all done before he adds the comma, which signals the continuation of the transcription.

When Richards first transcribed the daughter's name as **Egeptah** she became the namesake of her mother's revised name; i.e., an anomalous eponymous homonymy. Now, daughter is **Egyptus** and mother **Egeptah**, but not for long. In layer ^[09], Richards and Smith return to the mother's name. The **ah** in **Egeptah** is canceled via strikethrough and an interlinear **us** is added to spell **Egeptus**; but the medial *e* is still inconsistent with the medial *y* in the daughter's name. So in layer ^[10] the remaining letters of the inline name **Egeptah** are also canceled via strikethrough, a sublinear caret is added, and **Egyptus** is inserted above the line. Daughter is once again the namesake of her mother.

Settling on a name for Ham's wife reveals remarkable fluidity in Smith's prophetic lexicon. **Zep-tah**/**Zeptah**, **Jep-tah**(/**Gep-tah**), **Egeptah**(/**Egeptus**), and finally **Egyptus** are each transcribed as viable candidates for an imaginative Chaldean name whose meaning remains constant, despite the phonemic disparity of the name variations.²³

23. Whence **Zeptah** and **Egyptus**?

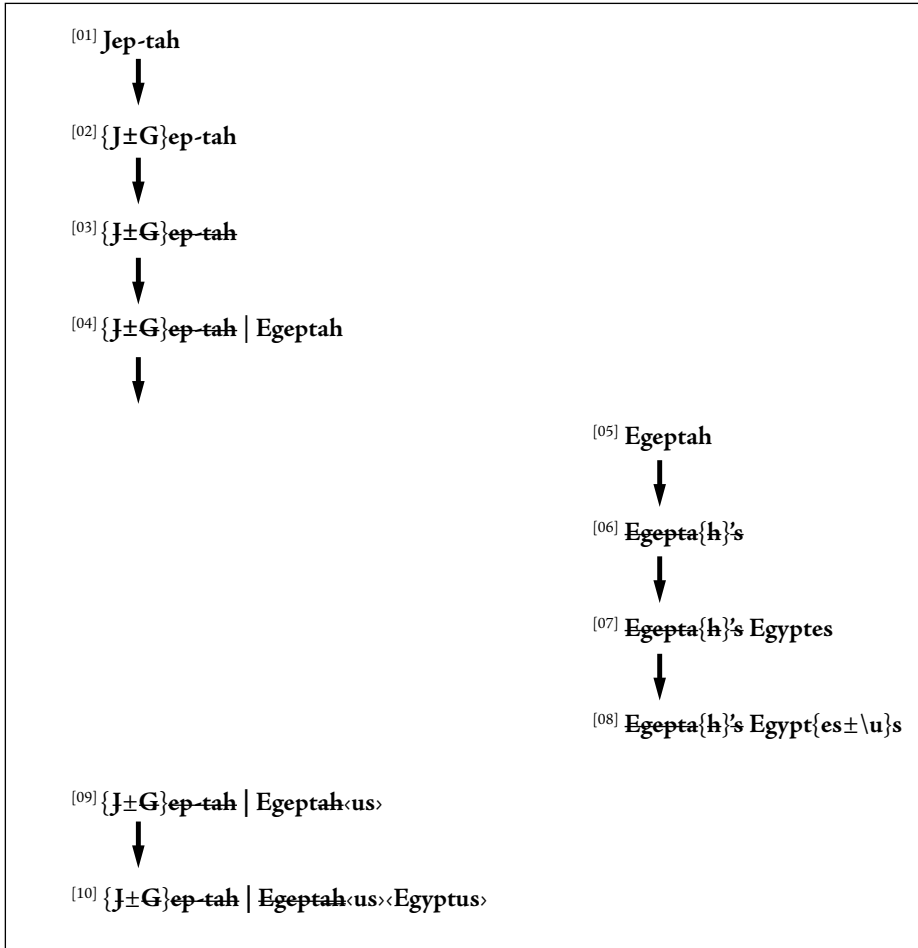
Smith's Egyptian alphabet and grammar project anticipates **Zeptah**. In the triplet Egyptian Alphabet manuscripts *EA*^{1a} (Joseph Smith scribe), *EA*^{1b} (Oliver Cowdery scribe), and *EA*^{1c} (William W. Phelps scribe), and the GAEL, Smith orchestrated imaginative interpretations of Egyptian and invented glyphs. Forms of "Zep" and "tah" crop up in several suggestive contexts. For instance, "Zip Zi" is said to entail among other things "all women: it took its origin from the earth yielding its fruit. and from the first woman who bore children; and men were multiplied upon the earth" (GAEL, 10); elsewhere "Zip Zi" entails "under or beneath, second in right or in authority or government, a fruitful place or fruitful vine" (GAEL, 13); "Iota tou - es Zip - Zip" signifies "the land of Egypt first seen under <water>" (*EA*^{1a}, 1); in the bound grammar and alphabet, "Iota toues Zip Zi" means "The woman sought to settle her sons in that land. she being the daughter of Ham" (GAEL, 14); "tone tahe or {th\}-tohe ton - es" signifies "beneath or under water" (*EA*^{1a}, 1); "Toan tou ee tahee tohee tou es" has several meanings, including "coming down in lineage by royal descent, in a line by onitas on of the royal familiees of the Kings theof Egypt" (GAEL, 5); each of these phrases and accompanying interpretations are variations on themes found in Abraham 1:20b–27. The triplet Egyptian Alphabet manuscripts are available online. *EA*^{1a}, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/egyptian-alphabet-js-and-oliver-cowdery-scribe-circa-july-circa-december-1835>; *EA*^{1b}, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/egyptian-alphabet-oliver-cowdery-scribe-circa-july-circa-december-1835>; *EA*^{1c}, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/egyptian-alphabet-william-w-phelps-scribe-circa-july-circa-december-1835>.

Mother and daughter namesakes likely garnered the final version of their names from "Egyptus," a sobriquet of Sethosis, said by Josephus to be the eponymous founder of Egypt. William Whiston, trans., *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (Baltimore: Armstrong and Plaskitt, and Plaskitt & Co., 1830), 584. Smith's brother Hyrum owned a copy of this edition of *Josephus* (located in the LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, call number 933 J83w 1830). As Egyptologist Stephen E. Thompson observes, "Egyptus" is an anachronistic Greek word that "does not mean 'forbidden' in any language." Stephen E. Thompson, "Egyptology and the Book of Abraham," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 155–56.

Table 2
Redaction Sequence

BA³ 7.16–17 (Abr. 1:23)

BA³ 8.6 (Abr. 1:25)



Still, the evolution from **Zeptah** to **Egyptus** is an intricate textual curiosity involving a resonant narrative figure—one of a handful of enigmatic women crucial to the first chapter of Smith's brief Abrahamic tale.

BRENT LEE METCALFE is editor of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* and co-editor with Dan Vogel of *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*. Brent has published and delivered presentations on Mormon studies in a variety of academic venues. He also serves on the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* editorial board. Brent is currently partnering with

John Dehlin of Mormon Stories Podcast to launch a neoteric online venue, Mormon Studies Podcast.

Appendix I Transcription Method

~~X~~ = X is canceled via strikethrough or partial strikethrough

X = X is canceled via erasure or partial erasure (wiping or scraping)

[X] = X is unreadable due to a physical trait of the document

{X} = X involves ambiguous overwriting

{X\Y} = Y overwrites a fully or partially written X

{~~X~~\Y} = X is canceled via strikethrough or partial strikethrough and Y overwrites X

{X\Y} = X is canceled via erasure or partial erasure and Y overwrites X

{X±Y} = X is either added to or subtracted from to create Y

{X≈Y} = X and Y share similar letterforms and in an emendation X now represents Y

X◇Z = ◇ is indecipherable (◇ = strikethrough; ◇ = erasure)

X^Z = ^ is missing in one text but present in a parallel text

⟨X⟩ = X is a supralinear insertion (inline text only)

| = line break

|| = page break