

# The Kinderhook Plates: A Test for a Prophet

How a 19th-century hoax became a defining test of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims and revealed a 140-year pattern of institutional defense and reversal.

The claim to be a “Seer, a translator, a prophet” (D&C 21:1) is central to Mormonism. The Kinderhook Plates provided a perfect, real-world opportunity to validate that claim. This is the story of that test.



# A 'Miraculous' Discovery Steeped in Treasure-Digging Lore

## The Setup (April 1843)

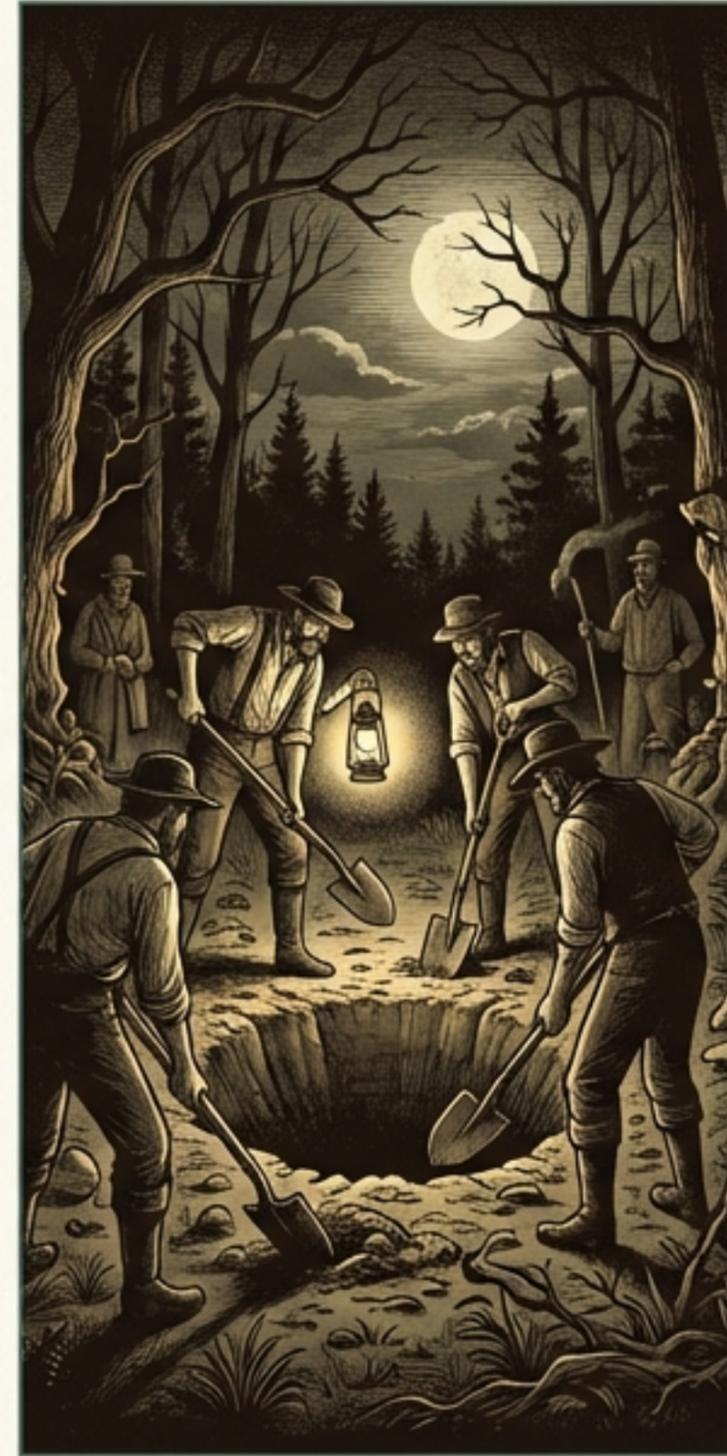
A man named Robert Wiley claims to have the same dream three nights in a row, telling him where to dig for artifacts in Kinderhook, Illinois.

## Familiar Patterns

- **Treasure Digging Tropes:** The "vision" to locate treasure and the magical "**power of three**" were common elements in 19th-century folk magic, a world Joseph Smith knew well.
- **Planted Evidence:** Wiley and his associates dug down 10 feet to "discover" six bell-shaped brass plates alongside skeletal remains. This mirrors Joseph Smith's own treasure-digging tactics, such as when he claimed to find a "feather" from a treasure that had "sank into the ground" for Josiah Stowell.

## The Mormon Connection

A member of the LDS Church was conveniently part of the final digging party, ensuring the plates would quickly be brought to the one man in the area believed to possess the power to translate them: **Joseph Smith**.

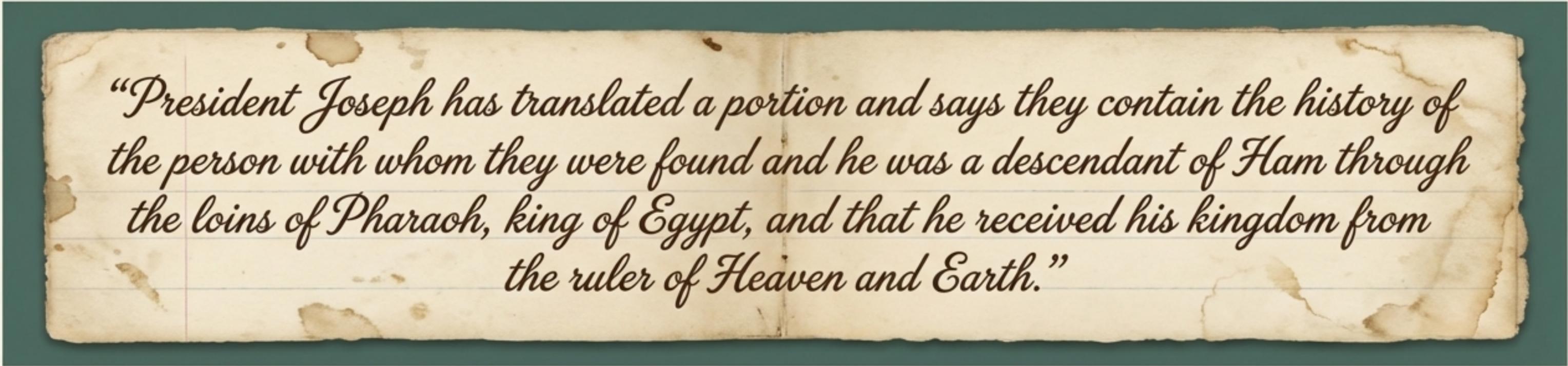


**Kinderhook Plates**  
Six bell-shaped brass plates, approx.  
3 inches wide, with etched characters.  
Discovered near Kinderhook, Illinois, 1843.

Folkloric Digging vs. Archaeological Finds: The Stark Contrast

# The Prophet's Pronouncement: A Translation is Declared

**Scribe's Record (May 1, 1843):** Joseph Smith's personal scribe, William Clayton, documented the event in his journal:



*“President Joseph has translated a portion and says they contain the history of the person with whom they were found and he was a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the ruler of Heaven and Earth.”*

## Immediate Red Flags

### Book of Abraham Echoes

The translation immediately ties into themes from Smith's ongoing Book of Abraham project, including Egyptian royalty and biblical lineages (Ham).

### The “Pharaoh” Error

Smith treats ‘Pharaoh’ as a personal name (“Pharaoh, king of Egypt”), not a title. This is the same error he made in the Book of Abraham.

Kinderhook Plates

Descendant of Ham

Pharaoh, King of Egypt

# The Church Press Proclaims a New Proof for the Book of Mormon



“...it would go to prove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, **which it undoubtedly will.**”

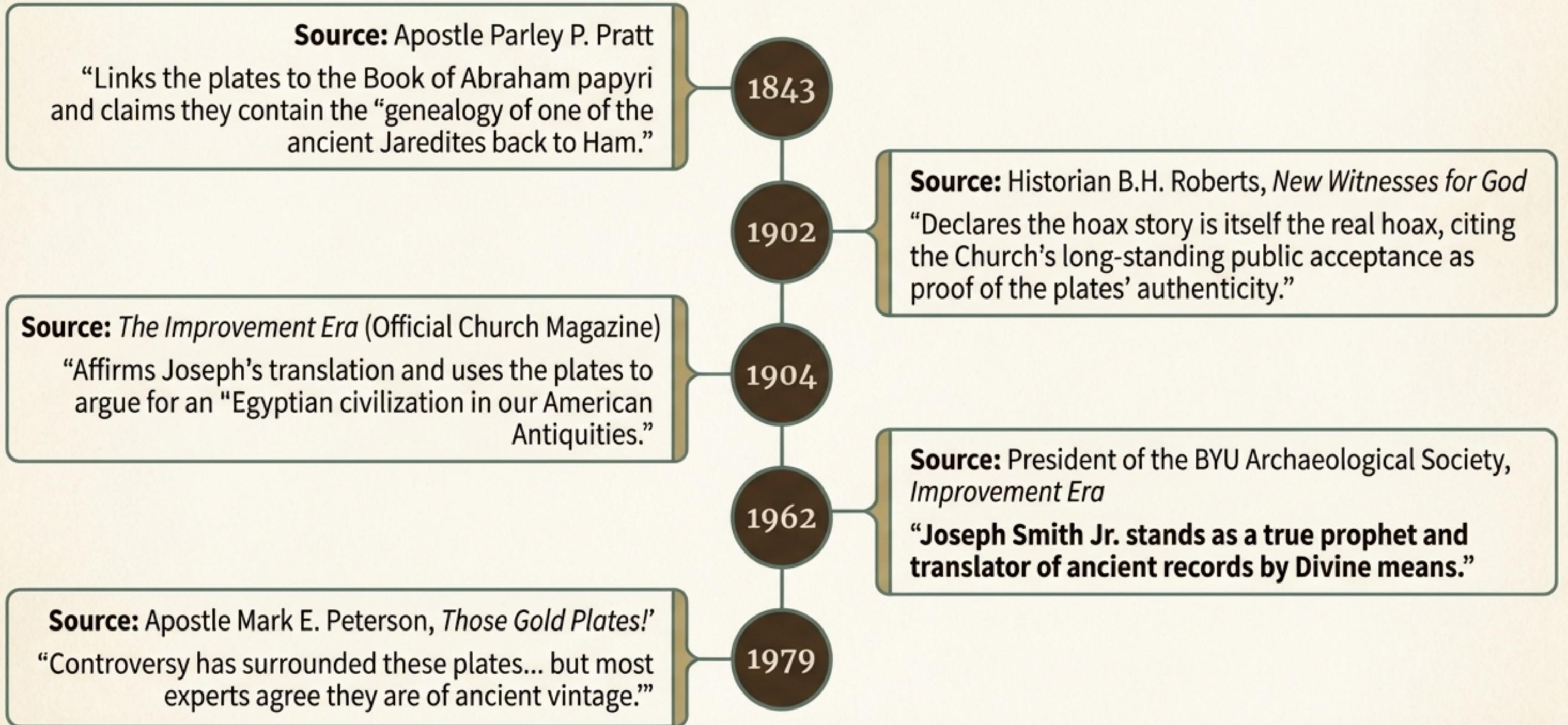
## The Implication

The third prophet of the church, John Taylor, was actively creating an expectation among members for a full translation from Joseph Smith.

The contents of the plates will be published in the Times and Seasons as soon as the translation is completed.

# A Century of Conviction: The Church Defends the Plates

## A Timeline of Unwavering Institutional Support



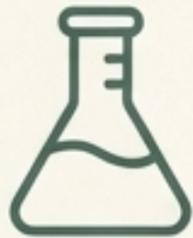


# Science Renders Its Verdict

## The Test (1980)

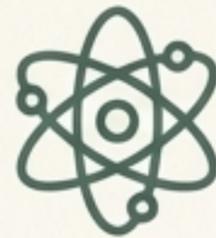
The Chicago Historical Society, which possessed one of the original plates, allows for scientific testing.

## The Findings (Published in the 1981 *Ensign*)



### Method of Creation

The plate was **etched with acid**, not engraved as ancient artifacts would be. This perfectly matched the hoaxer's confession.



### Material Composition

The plate was made from a "true brass alloy (copper and zinc) typical of the **mid-19th century**."



### Ancient Comparison

Ancient "brass" was actually bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) and would contain far more impurities.

The plate was a 19th-century creation, not an ancient artifact. The hoax was real.

# The 180-Degree Turn: The Church Re-Writes its History

**Source Sans Pro:** BYU Archaeological Society, 1962

**“Joseph Smith Jr.  
stands as a true  
prophet and translator.”**

**Ensign Magazine,** 1981

**“...no evidence exists  
that he manifested  
any... interest.”**

**The New Narrative** (*Ensign*, August 1981):

- “...appears to solve a previously unanswered question in church history...” (Framing the Church as a curious investigator, not a long-time defender of a false claim).
- “...helping to further evidence that the plate is what its producers later said it was...” (Positioning the outcome as a success for the Church’s version of history).

**The Reality:**

This statement directly contradicts the Church’s own *History of the Church*, Apostle John Taylor’s promise of a full translation, Apostle Parley P. Pratt’s statements, and a century of defense by Church historians and leaders.

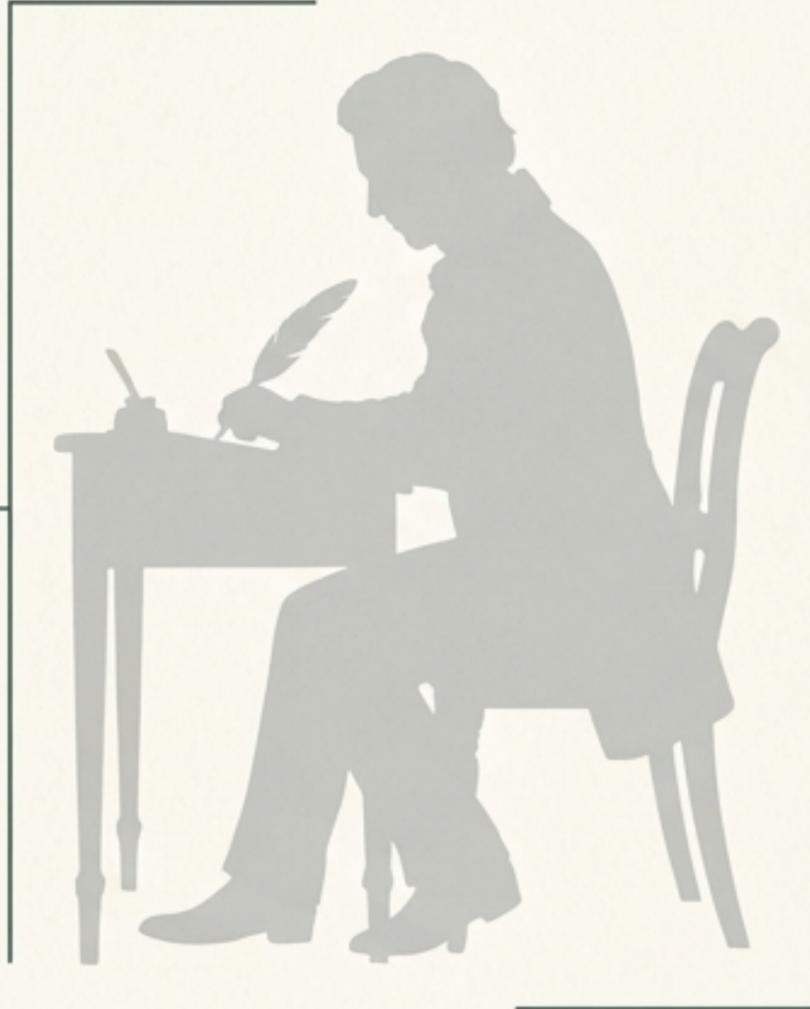
# The Apologetic Escape Hatch: Blame the Scribe

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## Church Apologetic (*Ensign*, 1981)

“Where the ideas written by William Clayton originated is unknown.”

Clayton’s journal is presented as unreliable and of mysterious origin.



## Historical Reality

William Clayton was one of Joseph Smith’s most trusted inner-circle scribes.

- Transcribed canonized scripture like D&C 132 (the polygamy revelation).
- Was with Joseph Smith in his home on May 1, 1843.
- Officiated the polygamous marriage between Joseph Smith (37) and Lucy Walker (17) that very same day.

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To claim Clayton’s journal is unreliable on the Kinderhook Plates requires questioning his reliability on everything else he recorded for Joseph Smith, including canonized scripture.

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# The **Unintended Consequence:** Destroying the Book of Abraham Defense

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## The Apologetic Connection

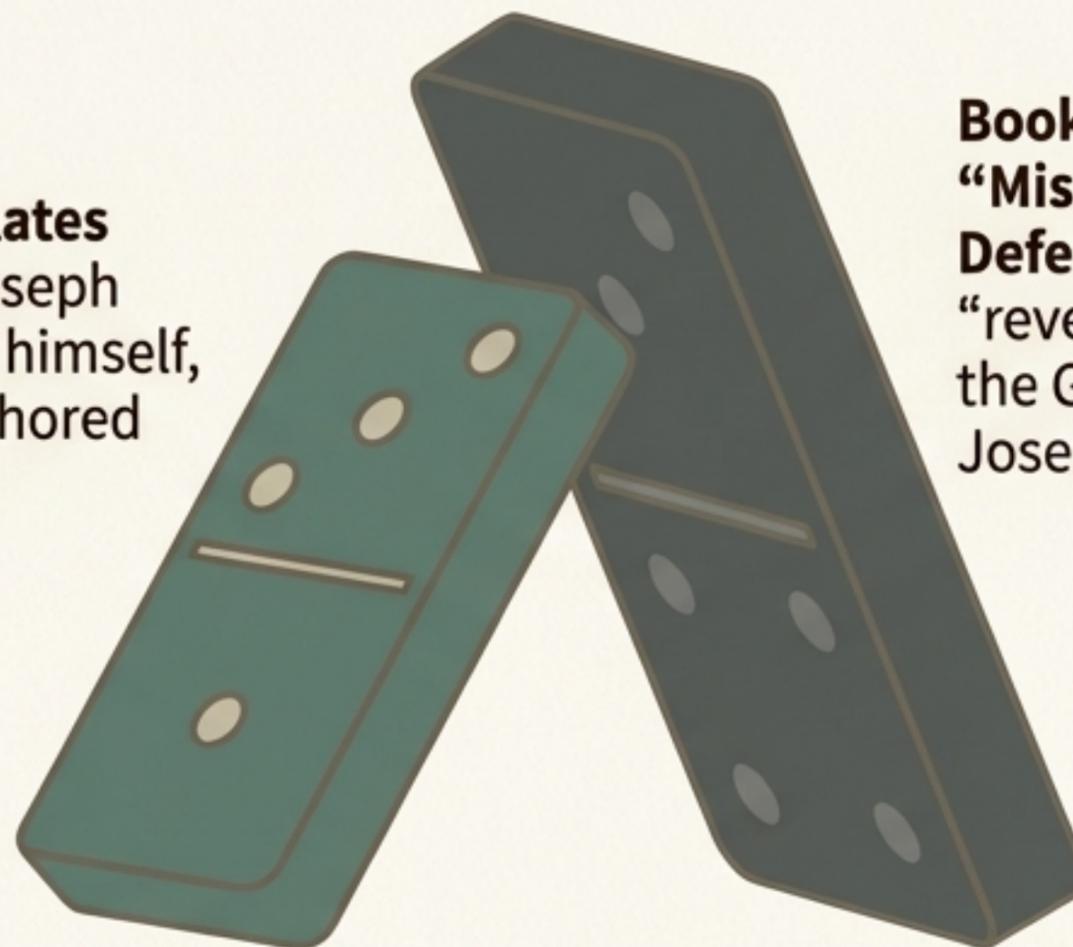
To explain away Joseph's partial translation, apologists claim he wasn't receiving revelation, but was simply comparing the Kinderhook characters to his "Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language" (**GAEL**)—the source document for the Book of Abraham.

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## The Fatal Contradiction

1. For Kinderhook: Apologists say Joseph authored and used the GAEL.
2. For Book of Abraham: Apologists say scribes created the GAEL later to distance Joseph from it.

**Kinderhook Plates**  
**Apologetic:** Joseph used the GAEL himself, proving he authored and trusted it.



**Book of Abraham**  
**"Missing Scroll"**  
**Defense:** Scribes "reverse-engineered" the GAEL without Joseph's input.

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## The Bottom Line

Both arguments cannot be true. The Kinderhook evidence shows Joseph Smith authored and trusted the GAEL. This confirms he was the source of the incorrect Book of Abraham translation and kills the popular "missing scroll" theory.

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# A Consistent Pattern: Testable Claims vs. Prophetic Performance

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Joseph Smith was given multiple opportunities to demonstrate his divine abilities. A clear pattern emerges when comparing situations he controlled versus those he did not.

Externally Testable Claims (When Not in Control)	Unfalsifiable Claims (When in Full Control)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❌ <b>Lost 116 Pages:</b> Refused to re-translate, claiming God commanded him to use a different set of plates to avoid being caught.</li><li>❌ <b>Book of Abraham Papyri:</b> Produced a “translation” that is verifiably incorrect according to Egyptologists.</li><li>❌ <b>Kinderhook Plates:</b> Gave a partial translation of a known hoax, failing to discern the fraud.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✅ <b>Zelph the Lamanite:</b> Declared a random skeleton found during Zion’s camp to be a “white Lamanite” warrior via supposed revelation. No one could verify or falsify the claim.</li></ul>

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The power of ‘discernment’ and ‘translation’ was only evident in situations where the claims could not be independently verified.

# The Question That Remains

**The Apologist's Question (1902):** B.H. Roberts focused on the hoaxers: Why did they wait 36 years to expose the fraud? He argued their silence proved the plates were real.

**The Investigator's Question:** History now shows the plates were fake. This raises a far more significant question.

**Why didn't a Prophet of God, a man who claimed to speak with deity and translate ancient records, expose the fraud the moment he saw it?**

The Kinderhook Plates were a perfect opportunity for Joseph Smith to prove his divine calling. Instead, the historical record reveals only a failed test and a 140-year cover-up.