

Michael E. Stone. *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Abraham*.

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Reviewed by E. Douglas Clark

Over a decade ago while attending an annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, I heard Professor Michael Stone mention he was working on a group of medieval Armenian texts containing traditions about the Patriarch Abraham. Having spent considerable time gathering every Abrahamic tradition I could find, I was excited at this news and asked when the work would be published. Professor Stone replied that it would not be soon. Since then, I have eagerly looked forward to this volume.

As one of Stone's many publications on Armenian apocrypha, and a sequel to two of those in particular (*Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Adam and Eve* and *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to the Patriarchs and Prophets*¹), this new tome takes its respected place in the field of biblical studies. It offers transcriptions and translations of fifteen previously unpublished² late medieval Armenian manuscripts recounting stories about the man revered as the forefather of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Of immediate interest to scholars, students, and lay readers alike, this material holds special significance for Latter-day Saints, to whom this review is primarily directed.

The highly credentialed and prolific Professor Stone,³ now emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is a leading authority on early Jewish and Christian writings of the Second Temple period, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, and is the doyen of scholars of Armenian apocryphal studies. His array of publications, which has been described as "dazzling in both its depth and breadth,"⁴ encompasses over 250 articles and approximately sixty books, including such landmark works as his *Fourth Ezra* (in the Hermeneia commentary series),⁵ *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (in the Compendia series),⁶ and *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha: With Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition* (in the Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha series).⁷

Much of his career has concentrated on a body of ancient and medieval literature that narrates, sometimes in first person, events in the lives of prominent biblical personalities. Many of these texts were once prized as authoritative by early Jewish and Christian communities but over time were laid aside, forgotten, and lost. Their recent emergence has astounded and revolutionized the world of biblical scholarship. “By the strangest quirk of fate respecting literature that I know of,” wrote Samuel Sandmel in 1983, “large numbers of writings by Jews were completely lost from the transmitted Jewish heritage. . . . Now . . . a door is being opened anew to treasures that are very old.”⁸

Among the biblical personalities who have been the focus of Stone’s research are Adam and Eve, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, the Twelve Patriarchs, and Moses—individuals who happen also to figure prominently in the expanded canon of Mormon scripture brought forth by Joseph Smith decades before the appearance of most of the apocryphal literature. Still relatively unknown outside of Mormon circles, the Mormon texts purport to be translations of ancient and authentic records, including a brief autobiography of Abraham.

The striking similarity between the Mormon material and some aspects of the recently discovered apocryphal works has caught the attention of no less a scholar than Yale professor and literary critic Harold Bloom, a non-Mormon who concluded that when Joseph Smith brought forth additional scripture, he somehow “broke through all the orthodoxies—Protestant, Catholic, Judaic— . . . back to elements that Smith rightly intuited had been censored out of the stories of the archaic Jewish religion.” Bloom marveled at the Mormon founder’s “uncanny recovery of elements in ancient Jewish theurgy that had ceased to be available either to normative Judaism or to Christianity, and that had survived only in esoteric traditions unlikely to have touched Smith directly.”⁹

No wonder Hugh Nibley called the apocryphal texts an “astonishing outpouring of ancient writings that is the peculiar blessing of our generation,” for although they are “copies of copies,” yet “when we compare them we cannot escape the impression that they have a real model behind them, more faithfully represented in some than in others.”¹⁰ For example, in Armenian works about Adam and Eve previously published by Stone, Latter-day Saints find parallels to several Mormon beliefs not mentioned in the Bible.¹¹

Traditions about Abraham are particularly significant for Latter-day Saints, who honor him not only as forefather but also as exemplar and

recipient of the covenant to which they are heirs. “Do the works of Abraham,” the Lord declared in modern revelation (D&C 132:29–32) and then provided through Joseph Smith an autobiographical account of the Patriarch describing some of his most important works. Called the book of Abraham, it was instantly recognized by early Church leaders as a divine gift of inestimable value. Parley Pratt admitted to being “lost in astonishment and admiration” at its contents, and Wilford Woodruff esteemed it as “great and glorious,” part of the “rich treasures that are revealed unto us in the last days.”¹²

With the conviction that authentic Abrahamic traditions survived outside the Bible, Latter-day Saints welcome the multitude of newly discovered ancient writings containing additional material about their illustrious forefather. Such texts hail from diverse times and places as his admiring descendants handed down stories about him and commented on their significance. And notwithstanding the inevitable embellishments and speculations and improvisations that accrued along the way, there remains an impressively consistent core, according to Nibley: “After viewing many texts from many times and places, all telling the same story, one emerges with the conviction that there was indeed one Abraham story.”¹³

Stone’s *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Abraham* adds a welcome dimension to the corpus of Abrahamic tradition. More than merely providing translations, the book features helpful explanations, charts, notes, and comments, including a general introduction discussing the various narratives and their possible sources and dates. In addition, each of the fifteen texts has its own brief introduction, followed by a transcription of the original Armenian and its English translation, along with footnotes commenting on textual issues and similarities to other sources. Also included are two appendices, a bibliography, an index of sources, and an index of names and select subjects. The facets of Abraham’s life and times addressed by the texts include:

- Mankind’s rampant immorality and a divinely sent famine: “And they did not cease sinning and fornication. God became angry and gave them famine” (41). These same elements are emphasized in the book of Abraham (see Abr. 1:29–30).
- Divine retribution in the form of ravenous ravens: “And in that time, a punishment of birds came, of a multitude of black ravens which were gathering up the autumn seed and eating the green fields. It had not ever been like this” (223). The ravens are mentioned also

in the ancient book of Jubilees, which has strong connections with the book of Abraham.

- Young Abraham's courageous opposition to idolatry at the peril of his life: "Abraham, taking fire, went to the idolatrous temple and set fire to it. . . . Then his father and all his relatives wished to kill Abraham" (149). Abraham's iconoclasm and the attempt by his father and relatives to kill him (see Abr. 1:7–15) are similarly chronicled in the book of Abraham and numerous other ancient sources.
- Abraham's faith in departing from his homeland: "Because you believed in me," God tells him, "do not dwell with the unbelievers" (194). While Genesis fails to mention young Abraham's belief, his faith in the Almighty is a conspicuous part of the story told in the book of Abraham.
- Abraham's age when he left Haran: Referring to a line in one of the texts about Abraham's departure from Haran, Stone notes, "The sentence may be construed to mean that Abraham went forth in his sixtieth year" (81, n. 13). Genesis says Abraham was seventy-five when he left Haran (Gen. 12:4), while the book of Abraham insists he was sixty-two (Abr. 2:14).
- Chronological and genealogical data relevant to the identity of Melchizedek: From the Flood to Abraham, says one text (53), was 942 years (similar to most other ancient chronologies but over three times longer than in the Masoretic text from which the King James Version was translated)—rendering impossible the late rabbinic identification of Noah's son Shem with Melchizedek, who in another Armenian text is said to be in the fifth generation from Shem and the son of a man named Melk'I or "my king" (97). Mormon scripture portrays Melchizedek not as Shem but as his descendant (D&C 84:14–16) who, in the land of Salem, "did reign under his father" (Alma 13:18).
- God's protection of Sarah in Egypt: Pharaoh is warned by an angel regarding Abraham, "He is a father of God; God is going to be born of his family. If you do any unexpected evil to them, know that I will kill you with this sabre and all this city of yours will be put to the sword" (115). God's protection of Sarah is implied in the book of Abraham and expressed in various ancient sources, such as the *Genesis Apocryphon* of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which insists

that when Abraham asked Sarah to say she was his sister, he had been divinely directed to do so (Abr. 2:22–25).

- A miraculous blessing by the laying on of hands: After Abraham’s generous servant Mamre extended kindness to a mysterious visitor, the visitor “placed his hands upon his head” and pronounced a blessing that resulted in a miracle (117). Another instance of a miraculous blessing by the laying on of hands in the Abraham story occurs in the *Genesis Apocryphon*, when Abraham relates what he performed for the ailing Pharaoh: “I prayed over [hi]m, that I might heal him, and I laid my hands upon his [h]ead. Thus, the affliction was removed from him. . . . The king recovered, rose up.”¹⁴ Pharaoh’s recognition of Abraham’s priesthood is mentioned in the book of Abraham (Abr. 1:26–27).
- Abraham’s exemplary hospitality to strangers and the needy: “And having seen this,” one text admonishes its readers, “learn too to do mercy to the poor and hospitality to strangers, if you wish to enter the kingdom of God” (160). The Book of Mormon attests to an ancient Israelite teaching—undoubtedly harking back to Abraham—that to qualify for the kingdom of God, one must not “turn away the needy, and the naked” or fail to “visit . . . the sick and afflicted, and impart of your substance, if ye have, to those who stand in need” (Alma 34:28).
- The impressive language used by Abraham’s three guests who promise the birth of Isaac: During the course of their visit, they speak “wondrous words” (170). Mormon scripture describes the three guests as “angels which were holy men . . . sent forth after the order of God” (JST Gen. 18:23) and tells that “angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost” (2 Ne. 32:3).
- The cataclysmic destruction that overwhelmed Sodom: “Fire and sulphur descended upon the city, and the deeps were split and water flowed forth. The storm of smoke boiled as it dripped down, cry and rumbling, terrible and fearsome” (93). The description is reminiscent of the fate that befell the wicked Nephite cities at the time of the terrible destruction described in the Book of Mormon (3 Ne. 9:1–12).
- The symbolic significance of the binding of Isaac—“a more terrible and greater trial than all” the others (212)—as a type of Christ’s sacrifice: “Abraham, Abraham,” the voice out of heaven declares,

“just as you did not withhold your son for my name’s sake, just so I too will not withhold my Son for your sake” (162). The Book of Mormon likewise describes Abraham’s offering as “a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:5).

In assessing what might have been improved in the book, the translations occasionally employ words that may give American readers pause, as when Lot’s daughters are said to be “affianced” (171), or when, speaking of idolaters, it is reported that God was angry and gave them famine and “exiguity” (193). But such words appear only rarely, and overall, the issue is negligible in this valuable new contribution to the literature of Abrahamic lore and legend.

Latter-day Saints seeking to do the works of Abraham, who began his momentous journey of faith by seeking ever “greater knowledge” (Abr. 1:2), will welcome the opportunity to do exactly that by perusing this treasure trove of material about Abraham himself. For this opportunity we owe a substantial debt of gratitude to Professor Michael Stone.

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1. Michael E. Stone, *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Adam and Eve*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha* vol. 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Michael E. Stone, *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to the Patriarchs and Prophets* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982). ^

2. All of the Armenian texts transcribed in this volume are here published for the first time, except for two that were made available in an eighteenth-century Armenian printing. None of the fifteen texts had previously been translated into English. ^

3. After earning his PhD under Frank Moore Cross at Harvard University, Michael E. Stone joined the faculty at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1966, where he founded the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and served for many years as Professor of Religious Studies and Professor of Armenian Studies. He has also taught and conducted research at other leading universities and institutes worldwide, including the University of Melbourne, Leiden University, Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies, Harvard Divinity

School, Yale University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Virginia, and University of Richmond, where he was the Distinguished National Endowment for the Humanities Visiting Professor. He is a recipient of the Landau Prize for lifetime achievement in research in the humanities and has served on the editorial boards of *Dead Sea Discoveries*, the *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, and the *Society of Biblical Literature, Pseudepigrapha Series*. ^

4. Esther G. Chazon, David Satran, and Ruth A. Clements, eds., *Things Revealed: Studies in Early Jewish and Christian Literature in Honor of Michael E. Stone*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism vol. 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), xvii. ^

5. Michael Edward Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). ^

6. Michael E. Stone, ed., *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*, Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, Section Two: The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud, vol. 2 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984). ^

7. Michael E. Stone, *Selected Studies in Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha: With Special Reference to the Armenian Tradition*, Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha vol. 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1991). ^

8. James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983, 1985), 2:xi, xiii. ^

9. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 82–85, 101. ^

10. Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet*, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1986), 95. ^

11. See instances cited in E. Douglas Clark, *Echoes of Eden: Eternal Lessons from Our First Parents* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2010), 33–63. ^

12. Parley P. Pratt, “Editorial Remarks,” *Millennial Star* 3, no. 4 (August 1842): 70–71; Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal: 1833–1893, Typescript*, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 2:159. ^

13. Hugh W. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2d ed., Collected Works of Hugh Nibley vol. 14 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 30. ^

14. 1QapGen xx.28–29, in Daniel A. Machiela, *The Dead Sea Genesis Apocryphon: A New Text and Translation with Introduction and Special Treatment of Columns 13–17*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah vol. 79 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 76–77. ^