

Ancient Near Eastern Creation Myths

The Book of Abraham's Creation account (Abr. 4–5) shares an obvious relationship with the biblical Creation account in Genesis (Gen. 1–2). However, it also shares common features with creation myths from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Turning to the Egyptian evidence, “the order of the creation process in the Book of Abraham is similar to that provided in Coffin Text 80, a text that appears in copies dating from about two hundred years before Abraham down to Abraham’s time, and is the only lengthy creation text we know of from that time.”¹ This text begins with a depiction of a primordial chaos (“the Abyss, in darkness and in gloom”²), which, like that in the Book of Abraham, clearly rules out a depiction of creation *ex nihilo*, or “out of nothing.” In this account,

the creator was “one who lit up the sky after the darkness.” The creator discusses the time when “I could not find a place to stand or to sit, before Heliopolis was founded so that I could be in it, before reeds were tied on which I could sit, before I made heaven so that it could be over my head . . . before the divine council existed.” Then the creator “begat the eldest of his spirits . . . when he separated earth from heaven,” and then he “made grain.” Various animals are given life: falcons, jackals, pigs, hippopotami, men, crocodiles, and fish “according to the command of” the creator “so that I may lead them to live with my mouth, which is life in their nostrils. I guided my breath into their throats.” The account has a

1. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 132. On Coffin Text 80 in general, see Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 177–83.

2. R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts, Volume I: Spells 1–354* (Warminster, U.K.: Aris and Phillips, 1973), 83.

number of other details, but it discusses similar topics in a similar order to the Book of Abraham.³

Considering that Abraham was directed to declare his teachings about astronomy and creation to the Egyptians (Abr. 3:15), it is favorable for the Book of Abraham's historicity that "the accounts are close enough for ancient Egyptians to find something in the Book of Abraham that would provide familiar echoes to their own accounts."⁴

Additionally, "there are . . . parallels between the Book of Abraham and contemporary Mesopotamian creation accounts," although these parallels are more general and in some cases only cursory.⁵ One such account, the myth of the gods Enki and Ninmah, "refers to the 'day when heaven [was separated] from earth,' and it follows with a discussion of the creation of humans by mixing the blood of a God with the clay from which humans were made. . . . [It also depicts] the separation of heaven and earth before the making of mortals."⁶ This text also directly mentions the primeval chaos, aligning with the Book of Abraham in rejecting creation *ex nihilo*.⁷ Other Mesopotamian creation myths also portray the separation of heaven and earth and the creation of humans in the same general order as the Book of Abraham, although the purposes behind the creation of humans are different in these accounts.⁸

Another interesting similarity between the Book of Abraham's Creation account and ancient Mesopotamian creation myths is that "the creation of man is connected with the sacrifice of a god" in these texts.⁹ This is seen in one myth where gods are slaughtered, and from their

3. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 132–33. Additional translations of this text can be found in Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts, Volume I*, 83–87; James P. Allen, "From Coffin Texts Spell 80," in *The Context of Scripture, Volume I: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 11–14.

4. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 133.

5. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 133.

6. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 133, citing W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 334–37.

7. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 335.

8. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 134. "Though the explicit purpose of life between the two accounts is similar, for the Babylonians, the purpose of life was to do heavy labor for the benefit of the gods so that the gods would no longer have to work. In the Book of Abraham, life is a test to 'prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them' (Abraham 3:25). Such a test may include serving God or their fellowman and might involve hard work, but it may also involve many other things—and it involves more than simply being a slave to take over menial tasks. The Book of Abraham promises rewards for obedience which are missing from the Babylonian text."

9. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 136.

blood humankind is fashioned,¹⁰ as well as in the myth of Atrahasis, in which humans are created from the flesh and blood of the sacrificed god Weila mixed with clay.¹¹

In the Book of Abraham this [connection with sacrifice] is mentioned obliquely: “The Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first” (Abraham 3:27). Latter-day Saints connect this with other accounts of the pre-existence to equate the one “like unto the Son of Man” with the premortal Jesus and the other with Lucifer (see Moses 4:1–4) and that the creation of man was dependent on the Son of God being willing to offer himself as an atonement for humans. The parallel, however, is with Latter-day Saint interpretation of the Book of Abraham and not the text of the Book of Abraham as we currently have it. That might be different if we had the full Book of Abraham.¹²

These parallels between the Book of Abraham’s Creation account and ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths serve nicely in situating the text in a plausible ancient Near Eastern context in Abraham’s day.

Further Reading

Gee, John. “The Creation.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 129–42. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

10. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 134; compare Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 355.

11. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 134, citing W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫašis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 58.

12. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 136.