

Facsimile 1 as a Sacrifice Scene

Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham visually depicts the narrative contained in Abraham 1:12–19. As interpreted by Joseph Smith, this scene depicts Abraham fastened upon an altar before some idolatrous gods. An idolatrous priest is about to sacrifice Abraham, who is protected by the angel of the Lord.

Since the mid-1800s, when Egyptologists first began analyzing the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham, Joseph Smith’s interpretation of this scene (sometimes called a lion couch scene, due to the prominent lion couch at the center of the illustrations) has clashed with Egyptological interpretations. In 1860, the French Egyptologist Théodule Devéria interpreted Facsimile 1 as depicting the resurrection of the god Osiris.¹ In 1912, Egyptologists interpreted Facsimile 1 as, variously, “the well known scene of Anubis preparing the body of the dead man,”² “a resurrection scene” showing “Osiris rising from the dead,”³ “an embalmer preparing a body for burial,”⁴ “the body of the dead lying” on a funerary bier,⁵ and “a dead man . . . lying on a bier” and being prepared for mummification.⁶ Similar interpretations of Facsimile 1 have been given in more recent years.⁷

1. Jules Remy, *Voyage au pays des Mormons*, 2 vols. (Paris: E. Dentu, 1860), 2:463; compare Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake City*, 2 vols. (London: W. Jeffs, 1861), 2:540.

2. F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Arrow Press, [1912]), 23.

3. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 26.

4. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 28.

5. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 30.

6. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 30.

7. See, for example, Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 18–20.

From the weight of this Egyptological opinion, it may seem strange to associate Facsimile 1 with sacrifice as Joseph Smith did. However, more recent investigation has turned up evidence that suggests a connection between sacred violence and scenes of the embalming and resurrection of the deceased (or the god Osiris). Evidence linking Osiris's mummification and resurrection with execration rituals can be detected "in the roof chapels of the Dendara Temple."⁸ Other Egyptologists have already drawn parallels between Facsimile 1 and the Dendara Temple scenes depicting the resurrection of Osiris⁹ but have failed to notice the connection these scenes make with ritual violence.¹⁰ For example, the inscription accompanying one such scene says of evildoers: "He will not exist, nor will his name exist, since you will destroy his town, cast down the wall of his house, and everyone who is in it will be set on fire; you will demolish his district; you will stab his confederates, his flesh being ashes, the evil conspirator consigned to the slaughterhouse so that he will no longer exist."¹¹

It may also be noteworthy in this regard that in these texts the word for the "lion couch" (*nmit*) is homophonous, or nearly identical, with the word for "abattoir, slaughterhouse" (*nmt*) as well as for "offerings" (*nmt*).¹² This homophony could plausibly have contributed to an association or relationship between the two words in the minds of some Egyptians, and examples from the Dendara Temple seem to indicate this. For instance, "in the same chapel, we have depictions of Anubis and the sons of Horus (presumably the figures under the lion couch in Facsimile 1) holding knives." The text accompanying these figures gives us a sense of what purpose they serve in the scenes.

8. John Gee, "Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri," *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 132; John Gee, "Execration Rituals in Various Temples," in 8. *Ägyptologische Tempeltagung: Interconnections between Temples, Warschau, 22.–25. September 2008*, ed. Monika Dolińska and Horst Beinlich (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz, 2010), 67–80, esp. 73–79.

9. Lanny Bell, "The Ancient Egyptian 'Books of Breathing,' the Mormon 'Book of Abraham,' and the Development of Egyptology in America," in *Egypt and Beyond: Essays Presented to Leonard H. Lesko upon His Retirement from the Wilbour Chair of Egyptology at Brown University, June 2005*, ed. Stephen E. Thompson and Peter Der Manuelian (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 2008), 26–28.

10. Gee, "Execration Rituals in Various Temples," 73–79.

11. Translation in Gee, "Execration Rituals in Various Temples," 74; for the hieroglyphic text, see Sylvie Cauville, *Le Temple de Dendara: Les chapelles osiriennes* (Cairo: IFAO, 1997), 200.

12. Gee, "Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri," 132; compare Penelope Wilson, *A Ptolemaic Lexicon* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 516–17, 521–22.

Anubis is here identified as the one “who smites the adversaries with his might, since the knife is in his hand, to expel the one who treads in transgression; I am the violent one who came forth from god, after having cut off the heads of the confederates of him whose name is evil.” The human-headed son of Horus is identified above his head as “the one who repulses enemies” and “who comes tearing out (*šd*) the enemies who butchers (*ths*) the sinners.” The baboon-headed son of Horus says: “I have slaughtered those who create injuries in the house of God in his presence; I take away the breath from his nostrils.” The jackal-headed son of Horus says: “I cause the hostile foreigners to retreat.” Finally, the falcon-headed son of Horus says: “I have removed rebellion (*h3y*).”¹³

From this and other evidence,¹⁴ it can be seen that at least some ancient Egyptians associated scenes of the resurrection of Osiris with the slaughter of enemies. Why might some ancient Egyptians have done so? It may relate to the myth of the resurrection of the god Osiris, which lion couch scenes were meant to depict. In the classic retelling of the myth, Osiris was slain and mutilated by his evil brother, Seth. Through the efforts of his sister-wife, Isis, the body of Osiris was magically reassembled and resurrected. The final vindication came when their son Horus slew Seth in combat and claimed kingship.¹⁵ The element in this myth of Horus slaying Seth and thereby the forces of chaos or disorder (including foreign peoples, rebels, and enemies of Pharaoh) might explain why sacrifice may have been associated with embalming and mummification in some contexts.¹⁶

13. Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 132–33; compare John Gee, “Glossed Over: Ancient Egyptian Interpretations of Their Religion,” in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Kerry Muhlestein (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012), 74. Cauville, *Le Temple de Dendara*, 2:107, calls these figures defending Osiris “aggressive genies” (*les génies agressifs*) who form a “defensive zone” (*zone de défense*) around his body.

14. Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 134–35.

15. Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 193–94; compare A. M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu. II. C. The Triumph of Horus over His Enemies: A Sacred Drama,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 28 (1942): 32–38; A. M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu. II. C. The Triumph of Horus over His Enemies: A Sacred Drama (Continued),” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 29 (1943): 2–36; and A. M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu. II. C. The Triumph of Horus over His Enemies: A Sacred Drama (Concluded),” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 30 (1944): 5–22.

16. This connection is explicitly made in Papyrus Jumilhac. See Harco Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” in *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years, Part 1: Studies Dedicated*

Interestingly, a papyrus from the first century BC (not far removed from the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri) “comments on the fate suffered in the embalming place during the initial stages of mummification by one who was overly concerned with amassing wealth while alive.”¹⁷ As read in the text, “It is the chief of the spirits (=Anubis) who is first to punish after the taking of breath. Juniper oil, incense, natron, and salt, searing ingredients, are a ‘remedy’ for his wounds. A ‘friend’ who shows no mercy attacks his flesh. He is unable to say ‘desist’ during the punishment of the assessor.”¹⁸ Commenting on this passage, Egyptologist Mark Smith observes that in this text “the embalming table [the lion couch] is also a judge’s tribunal and the chief embalmer, Anubis, doubles as the judge who executes sentence. For the wicked man, mummification, the very process which is supposed to restore life and grant immortality, becomes a form of torture from which no escape is possible.”¹⁹ That Anubis had a role as judge of the dead, besides merely being an embalmer, has previously been acknowledged by Egyptologists.²⁰

One task Anubis fulfilled with this role was as a guard or protector who “administer[ed] horrible punishments to the enemies of Osiris.”²¹ From surviving evidence it is apparent that “Anubis must have been engaged in warding off evil influences, and it is conceivable that he did so as a judge. . . . [One Egyptian text even] identifies Anubis as a butcher slaying the enemies of Osiris while [another] states that such butchers are in fact a company of magistrates.”²² As a “reckoner of hearts” (*ip ibw*), Anubis was “the inflictor of the punishment . . . of the enemies” of Osiris.²³ So from the perspective of the ancient Egyptians, the process of embalming and mummification included elements of ritual violence against evildoers or agents of chaos. “The punishment of enemies by a ‘judge’ is simply a part of the protective ritual enacted in connection with the embalment of the deceased.”²⁴

to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 741.

17. Mark S. Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26.

18. Smith, *Traversing Eternity*, 26–27.

19. Smith, *Traversing Eternity*, 27.

20. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 719–43.

21. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 726.

22. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 727.

23. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 735.

24. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 740; compare Cauville, *Le Temple de Dendara*, 2:108, who observes that the role of Anubis in these Dendara embalming scenes is to act as

To be sure, there are still some significant differences in how Joseph Smith interpreted the lion couch scene in Facsimile 1. For one thing, embalming and mummification were only ever performed after the death of a person and were never meant to inflict death or otherwise sacrifice the person on the lion couch. Likewise, Anubis and the other figures attending to the mummification of the dead were meant to slaughter the enemies of Osiris, certainly not the figure of Osiris on the lion couch. This is therefore not to suggest that somehow Abraham had already been killed and was then set to be mummified. Nor is it to suggest that these parallels are perfect matches for how Joseph Smith interpreted this scene. Rather, it is to say that “excluding a sacrificial dimension to lion couch scenes” or scenes depicting the mummification of Osiris, which is how Egyptologists have interpreted Facsimile 1, “is un-Egyptian, even if we cannot come up with one definitive reading [of Facsimile 1] at this time.”²⁵

Further Reading

- Gee, John. “The Facsimiles.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 143–56. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
- . “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri.” *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 113–37, esp. 130–35.
- Nibley, Hugh. “Facsimile 1: A Unique Document.” In *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee, 115–78. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 18. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009.

both an embalmer and a butcher of Osiris’s enemies. “Cette double fonction est aussi assumée par les trois Anubis: préposés à l’embaumement (*hnty sh-ntr, nb w^cbt, imi-wt*), ils massacrent Seth et le découpent en morceaux.”

25. Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 135.