

Abraham and Idrimi

The Book of Abraham narrates the life of the biblical patriarch in a first-person autobiographical voice. The book begins: “In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence” (Abr. 1:1). This first-person voice continues throughout the text as if Abraham himself was writing.

When the Book of Abraham was published in 1842, with the exception of portions of the Bible, no other purported autobiographical texts from the ancient Near East were known. The Book of Abraham was unique in that respect. In the last nearly two hundred years, archaeology has uncovered more texts that we can compare with the Book of Abraham. One such ancient text discovered in 1939 contains strikingly similar features to those of the Book of Abraham. It too is an “autobiography” in that it narrates a story in the first person. It speaks of a ruler named Idrimi who lived in ancient Syria not long after the likely time of Abraham (ca. 2000–1800 BC).¹ “Idrimi’s autobiography compares well with Abraham’s autobiography in both subject and form, even though Idrimi’s autobiography dates about two hundred years later.”²

Although scholars frequently call Idrimi’s inscription an “autobiography,”³ this term might be somewhat misleading. One scholar

1. John Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 34–39.

2. Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” 35.

3. See, for instance, British Museum, description of object 130738, accessed February 9, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1939-0613-101; T. C. Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum: Interpreting the Evidence* (London: The British Museum Press, 1988), 28; Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 62–63; Piotr



FIGURE 19. Statue of Idrimi, king of Alalakh, ca. 1490–1465 BC (British Museum, 130738), carved magnesite inlaid with glass. An autobiographical inscription runs along the body of the statue. Photograph by Rama, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_King_Idrimi-IMG_4553-black.jpg, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA-2.0-FR.

surveying this subject has written that “there is no autobiography as such in the ancient world, if we describe ‘autobiography’ as the retrospective interpretation of the author’s own life—a contemplative self-scrutiny of the past. . . . There are, however, ancient texts that seem autobiographical, in which first-person narrators recount what they represent as parts of their own lives.”⁴ This is further complicated by the fact that “we do not know if such ancient autobiographical texts were written by the individuals themselves, dictated to scribes, or ghostwritten by scribes.”⁵

On the other hand, Egyptologists reviewing Egyptian (auto)biographical tomb inscriptions from Abraham’s day tend to think that “if autobiography is the narration of bits of one’s life from a position of self-awareness and reflection, then ancient Egyptian autobiographical inscriptions were true autobiographies,” even if “their self-awareness was more

Bienkowski, “Autobiographies,” in *Dictionary of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Piotr Bienkowski and Alan Millard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 41; Tremper Longman III, “The Autobiography of Idrimi (1.148),” in *The Context of Scripture, Volume One: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 479–81; and Ekin Kozal and Mirko Novák, “Alalakh and Kizzuwatna: Some Thoughts on the Synchronization,” in *Overturing Certainties in Near Eastern Archaeology: A Festschrift in Honor of K. Aslihan Yener*, ed. Çiğdem Maner, Mara T. Horowitz, and Allan S. Gilbert (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2017), 297–99.

4. Edward L. Greenstein, “Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, 4 vols. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1995), 4:2421.

5. Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” 35.

elementary and naive than the modern varieties.”⁶ As summarized in another recent scholarly publication on this topic,

(Auto-)biography is a genre of ancient Egyptian written discourse that was central to high culture from its earliest periods. Inscribed in hieroglyphs, the formal, display-oriented, and sacralizing variety of the Egyptian script, these texts belonged to the nonroyal elites. They present, with rare exceptions in the first person, aspects of individual lives and experience, sometimes as narratives of key events, sometimes as characterizations of personal qualities, often bringing about a configuration of the speaker with distinguished beings or realities such as the king, the gods, or order (Maat). Thousands of such texts are known from the mid-third millennium BCE to early Roman times, undergoing significant changes over time.⁷

As with Northwest Semitic and Mesopotamian (auto)biographical texts,⁸ however, we must appreciate that these texts may not have been entirely true “(auto)biographies” in the sense we often mean today.

The texts that we often conventionally term as biographies (or autobiographies) frustrate expectations associated with Western definitions of the similarly termed types of discourse, which may be misleading more than anything else in studying the Egyptian material. Egyptian biographical texts underwent significant changes in format, materiality,

6. Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom: A Study and an Anthology*, *Orbis Biblicus Et Orientalis* 84 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1988), 2.

7. Julie Stauder-Prochet, Elizabeth Froom, and Andréas Stauder, “Introduction,” in *Ancient Egyptian Biographies: Contexts, Forms, Functions*, ed. Julie Stauder-Prochet, Elizabeth Froom, and Andréas Stauder (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2020), 1. A cursory glance at this volume, which contains a collection of studies on the subjects of (auto)biography from ancient Egypt and cognate cultures, reveals a wealth of material from the ancient world that may prove highly relevant and interesting to the Book of Abraham. Literary analyses of the Book of Abraham, including comparative analyses with other ancient (auto)biographical texts, are sadly wanting. Future study on this point seems expeditious and a worthwhile avenue of continued research.

8. On the latter, consult Christopher Woods, “Self-Representation in Mesopotamia: The Literary Evidence,” in *Ancient Egyptian Biographies*, 29–46, who explains that “the closest Mesopotamian counterpart to the Egyptian tomb inscriptions, at least in terms of outlining a career and highlighting scenes from a life, are the royal inscriptions, which celebrate a king’s accomplishments or chronicle military campaigns, and are often cast in the first person. Certainly, there is autobiographical content of a personal kind to be gleaned from this large corpus” (quote at 29; for his discussion of the Idrimi text as “the first of our historically grounded pseudo-autobiographies,” see pages 32–35).

contexts, configurations of language, and functions over the three thousand years of their history. Despite such variety, they are intuitively recognized as a specific type of Egyptian written discourse, differentiated from other types (e.g., literary or funerary) by particular constraints of decorum and specific functions.⁹

In any case, while it is “unlikely that Idrimi carved the words on his statue, . . . he may have been directly responsible for the content of the text.”¹⁰ From an ancient point of view, it would not have really mattered if an author of a text used a scribe to do the physical writing or even influence the composition. If he was following known ancient literary conventions, then it is possible—and indeed likely—that Abraham similarly employed a scribe to help him compose his text.¹¹

Another problem is that scholars are not always sure how much ancient Near Eastern “autobiographical” texts are fictional as opposed to historical. While it is certainly possible that these texts recounted real-world events or captured authentic experiences in the life being narrated, it is also likely that they exaggerated or even fabricated elements of the story to suit the literary and ideological preferences of their subjects.¹² “Ancient authors writing in the first person understandably sought to justify and promote themselves or, in the case of scribal authors, their patrons. When that is all they do, their literary products have little more than historical interest.”¹³

Regardless of how much historicity we assign to it, the parallels between Idrimi’s “autobiography” and Abraham’s record are unmistakable and include both reporting their journeys through Canaan, both emphasizing that their travel to their new residence was the result of divine inspiration, both referring back to promises made to their ancestors for whom they have records, both describing that they worshipped the way that their fathers did, and both dealing in covenants.¹⁴ Idrimi and Abraham also parallel each other in another important way. “Many

9. Stauder-Prochet, Frood, and Stauder, “Introduction,” 1.

10. Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” 35; compare Greenstein, “Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia,” 2424.

11. See the discussion in Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary P. Gilum, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 14 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 2000), 4–9.

12. Greenstein, “Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia,” 2422–23.

13. Greenstein, “Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia,” 2431.

14. Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” 38.

ancient near eastern royal inscriptions employ first-person discourse; but virtually no other text quotes the speaker's inner thoughts and personalizes the significance of his accomplishments as does [Idrimi's] narrative."¹⁵ Similar to Idrimi's account, the Book of Abraham quotes the patriarch's inner thoughts and personalizes the narrative (for example, Abr. 2:12–13). The two texts also open in very similar manners:

Book of Abraham (1:1)

"In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence."

"Autobiography" of Idrimi

"In Aleppo, my ancestral home . . . I, Idrimi, the son of Ilim-ilimma . . . took my horse, chariot, and groom and went away."¹⁶

The parallels between these two texts, as well as other considerations, indicate that "the Book of Abraham belongs to the same specific literary tradition as Idrimi's autobiography." This, naturally, raises the question, "How did Joseph Smith manage to publish in the Book of Abraham a story that closely matched a Middle-Bronze-Age Syrian autobiography that would not be discovered for nearly a hundred years?"¹⁷ The most plausible explanation is that the Book of Abraham belongs to that time period, genre of literature, and part of the world.

Further Reading

Gee, John. "Abraham and Idrimi." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 34–39.

Pike, Dana M. "Abraham." In *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, 9–12. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

15. Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient Western Asia," 2428.

16. Edward L. Greenstein and David Marcus, trans., "The Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 8 (1976): 67, cited in Gee, "Abraham and Idrimi," 37. The opening lines of the Idrimi inscription read in their entirety: "In Aleppo, my ancestral home, a hostile [incident] occurred so that we had to flee to the people of Emar, my mother's relatives, and stay there. My older brothers also stayed with me, but none of them had the plans I had. So I, Idrimi, the son of Ilim-ilimma, devotee of Im, Hebat, and my lady Ištar, lady of Alalab, thinking to myself, 'Whoever his patrimony is a great nobleman, but whoever [remains] among the citizens of Emar is a vassal,' took my horse, chariot, and groom and went away."

17. Gee, "Abraham and Idrimi," 38.