

Introduction

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When we read the Book of Abraham with the reflection that its light has burst upon the world after a silence of three or four thousand years, during which it has slumbered in the bosom of the dead, and been sealed up in the sacred archives of Egypt's mouldering ruins; when we see there unfolded our eternal being—our existence before the world was—our high and responsible station in the councils of the Holy One, and our eternal destiny; when we there contemplate the majesty of the works of God as unfolded in all the simplicity of truth, opening to our view the wide expanse of the universe, and shewing the laws and regulations, the times and revolutions of all the worlds, from the celestial throne of heaven's King, or the mighty Kolob, whose daily revolution is a thousand years, down through all the gradations of existence to our puny earth, we are lost in astonishment and admiration, and are led to explain, what is man without the key of knowledge? or what can he know when shut from the presence of his maker, and deprived of conversation with all intelligences of a higher order? Surely the mind of man is just awaking from the deep sleep of many generations, from his thousand years of midnight darkness.

—Parley P. Pratt (1842)¹

The Book of Abraham is accepted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an inspired or revealed translation of the writings of the biblical patriarch Abraham.² Joseph Smith began the translation of the text after he acquired some Egyptian papyrus scrolls and

1. Parley P. Pratt, "Editorial Remarks," *Millennial Star* 3, no. 4 (August 1842): 70–71.

2. See "Introduction," in *The Pearl of Great Price: A Selection from the Revelations, Translations, and Narrations of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), v.

mummies in summer 1835.³ Canonized as scripture by the Church in 1880,⁴ the book narrates an account of the patriarch's near-sacrifice at the hands of his idolatrous kinsfolk, his journey into Canaan, the covenant he entered into with God, and his visions of the premortal world and the Creation. Although a short book of only five chapters, the Book of Abraham has nevertheless contributed significantly to Restoration doctrine, particularly as it pertains to the Latter-day Saint understanding of the Abrahamic covenant and the concept of the premortal existence of humankind.⁵

While Latter-day Saints cherish the Book of Abraham and accept its inspiration on faith, they also have not been afraid to explore the text with scholarly tools in order to better understand it. A pioneering scholar of the Book of Abraham was Hugh Nibley (1910–2005), a former professor of religion at Brigham Young University with academic training in ancient history and languages.⁶ Nibley wrote extensively

3. For an accessible overview of the history of the Book of Abraham and its status in the Church today, see “Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham,” Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>. A useful print volume covering the same topic can be found in John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017).

4. “Fiftieth Semi-annual Conference. Fifth Day,” *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, October 12, 1880, 3.

5. On the doctrinal contributions of the Book of Abraham, see Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 121–27, 163–73; Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 109–40.

6. A few of Nibley’s more noteworthy predecessors in Book of Abraham studies include George Reynolds (1842–1909) and B. H. Roberts (1857–1933). Reynolds penned a series of articles on the Book of Abraham in the late nineteenth century that argued for its ancient authenticity and inspiration (see George Reynolds, “The Book of Abraham—Its Genuineness Established,” published serially between January and April 1879 in *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 41, nos. 1–14, and republished as *The Book of Abraham: Its Authenticity Established as a Divine and Ancient Record, with Copious References to Ancient and Modern Authorities* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1879]), while Roberts led a spirited defense of the book when it came under scrutiny in the early twentieth century (see B. H. Roberts, “A Plea in Bar of Final Conclusions,” *Improvement Era* 16, no. 4 [February 1913]: 309–25; B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930], 2:126–39). As important as these two figures are in the history of Book of Abraham studies, however, neither of them had the same degree of academic training as Nibley, and many of their arguments are now very outdated. This is not to say they did not raise important questions and points to consider nor that their early contributions were unimportant, only

on the Book of Abraham during his career, producing several important contributions to the scholarly discussion surrounding this book of scripture.⁷ Since Nibley's day, more scholars have turned their gaze to the Book of Abraham from a number of different perspectives. The results have been nothing short of remarkable. Scholars have profitably evaluated the historical details of the text with Egyptological, archaeological, and linguistic tools; they have read its narrative closely to elucidate literary and poetic patterns; they have clarified its composition and transmission history through textual criticism; and they have explored the rich doctrine of the book. In addition to making compelling arguments for the historicity of the Book of Abraham, as well as its narrative coherence and theological profundity, Nibley and other scholars have also argued that elements of Joseph Smith's interpretation of the three facsimiles accompanying the text find plausible legitimacy as knowledge of ancient Egypt and other ancient cultures has advanced.

A major obstacle to those who wish to study the Book of Abraham more closely, however, is that this scholarship spans decades, is scattered throughout multiple venues (books, journals, videos, podcasts, conference proceedings, and so forth), and is sometimes very technical. This can make matters daunting for some Latter-day Saints who wish to get a firm grasp on this material. To remedy this, in 2019 Book of Mormon Central, a nonprofit research foundation dedicated to making the Book of Mormon accessible, comprehensible, and defensible to the entire world, launched an initiative called Pearl of Great Price Central with the aim, in part, to collect, synthesize, and popularize scholarly work on the Book of Abraham in order to provide study resources for Latter-day Saints and others who wish to enhance their engagement

that Nibley exceeded them in terms of both quality and quantity and therefore rightly deserves his place as the forefather of modern Book of Abraham scholarship.

7. See Hugh Nibley, "A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price," published serially between January 1968 and May 1970 in the *Improvement Era*, vols. 71–73; Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 16 (1975; 2nd ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005); Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 14 (1981; 2nd ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 2000); Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, ed. John Gee, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 18 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2010); Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 20 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2010).

with this book of scripture.⁸ In August 2019, Pearl of Great Price Central launched a series of short essays called Book of Abraham Insights that highlighted some of the more noteworthy convergences between the Book of Abraham and the ancient world, explored how Joseph Smith’s interpretations of the facsimiles in some ways harmonize with modern scholarship, and provided an overview on what is known about the coming forth and translation of the Book of Abraham. The Insights were kept deliberately short so as not to overwhelm readers with sometimes technical and arcane information about ancient languages and cultures while also remaining well-documented and rigorous and providing a bibliography for those wanting to dive deeper into these matters.

In January 2020, Pearl of Great Price Central published its fortieth Book of Abraham Insight before shifting attention to Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price in anticipation for the April 2020 general conference of the Church, which had been designated by President Russell M. Nelson as a bicentennial celebration.⁹ It was at that time that the authors of this present volume, who were the principal researchers behind the Book of Abraham Insights on the Pearl of Great Price Central website, felt it was appropriate to revise the Insights and make them available in print. Accordingly, the subsequent months of the year 2020 were spent revising the Insights to incorporate feedback from readers, update material in response to advances in scholarship, take into consideration constructive critiques, expand some material that was at first kept deliberately short, and include new material that could not appear in the initial run of the Insights due to constraints in Pearl of Great Price Central’s publishing schedule. With the kind assistance and cooperation of John W. Welch and Steven C. Harper, the former and current editors of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, respectively, we are pleased to now find a home for the final result of these revisions and expansions as an issue of that journal.

As the name of this issue indicates, and in keeping with the original purpose of Pearl of Great Price Central’s Book of Abraham Insights while also building on it, our intention here is threefold: first, to introduce readers to what the past decades of scholarship on the Book of Abraham have already produced; second, to guide readers through trends in Book of Abraham research currently unfolding; and third, to provide some

8. Visit the Book of Mormon Central website at <https://bookofmormoncentral.org> and the Pearl of Great Price Central website at <https://pearlofgreatpricecentral.org>.

9. Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 122.

new insights into the Book of Abraham as examples of where future scholarship can go. We hope, therefore, that we will have something of value to offer readers from a variety of backgrounds—those already well acquainted with Book of Abraham scholarship and those who may be encountering this work for the first time. It is also for this reason that we beg the reader’s pardon for indulging, at times, in rehashing previously published work on the Book of Abraham, including our own, by extensively quoting ourselves and other scholars in ways that summarize and distill past scholarship that may not always necessarily make new contributions to the discussion. Part of our goal with this issue, which we have titled *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*, is to review what we already know, and we do not wish to leave readers confused who are just now encountering Book of Abraham scholarship, so we felt it not too inappropriate to recapitulate ourselves and others sometimes verbatim.

The content in this volume rearranges the organizational structure that was first laid out on the Pearl of Great Price Central website in order to create something of a more logical progression. The first section (“The Coming Forth of the Book of Abraham”) gives an overview of the coming forth and translation of the Book of Abraham in the nineteenth century. The second section (“The Book of Abraham in the Ancient World”) provides an ancient (including biblical) context for the Book of Abraham or otherwise touches on points related to the historicity of the text. The third and final section (“The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham”) looks at the facsimiles and focuses on the more noteworthy instances where Joseph Smith’s interpretations converge with modern Egyptological knowledge. These three interlocking issues are worthy of individual review and consideration since how the reader evaluates one of them will undoubtedly affect how he or she evaluates the other two.

Because each of us, the authors, has academic training in Egyptology and Near Eastern studies, we are conscientious of the balancing act that comes with, as it were, “translating” academic jargon and technical language into a comprehensible dialect for nonacademic but interested lay readers. This includes how to transliterate ancient Egyptian and other languages, which sometimes requires the use of characters not found in the English alphabet. Because some of the arguments in this book rely on careful analysis of the Egyptian language, we have followed standard Egyptological conventions of transliteration. We have also grappled with how much to assume that our readers are familiar with the ancient cultures we write about. We hope that we have struck a proper balance between making our prose accessible and preserving

scholarly rigor or accuracy. For readers who are eager to get into the technical aspects of the issues covered in this book, we advise they follow our footnotes and the recommendations for further reading at the end of each article.

It is our sincere hope that *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* will equip seekers and honest questioners with the best, most reliable scholarly resources currently available and provide meaningful insights into this extraordinary scriptural text. We hope that this work will serve as a reliable guide as we look back to see how far we have come in our understanding as well as look forward to pursue new scholarly lines of inquiry that help us better understand the Book of Abraham in a variety of contexts and thereby, we hope, also raise appreciation for this book as sacred scripture and strengthen faith in Joseph Smith's calling as a modern seer and revelator.