Kolob, the Governing One

One of the more memorable contributions of the Book of Abraham is its depiction of Kolob (Abr. 3:3–4, 9, 16; Facsimile 2, fig. 1). According to the Book of Abraham, Kolob is characterized by the following:

- It is a star or planet (Abr. 3:1–2, 8–9).¹
- It is a “great [star]” and one of the “governing ones” (Abr. 3:3).

• It is “near unto [God]” or “nigh unto the throne of God” (Abr. 3:2–3, 9–10).

• It was used to tell relative time (“one revolution [of Kolob] was a day unto the Lord, after his manner of reckoning, it being one thousand years according to the time appointed unto that whereon thou [Abraham] standest” [Abr. 3:4]).

• It “signifi[ed] the first creation, nearest to the celestial, or the residence of God. First in government, the last pertaining to the measurement of time. The measurement according to celestial time, which celestial time signifies one day to a cubit” (Facsimile 2, fig. 1).

Latter-day Saints have long been interested in Kolob for its doctrinal and cosmological significance. The opening words to the beloved hymn “If You Could Hie to Kolob,” written by William W. Phelps, were of course inspired by Kolob in the Book of Abraham.

In recent years, spurred on by promising discoveries, some Latter-day Saint scholars have sought to situate Kolob in the ancient world.


3. “If You Could Hie to Kolob,” in Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 284, first published in 1856 under the title “There Is No End,” Deseret News, November 19, 1856, 2. Although perhaps the best known, “If You Could Hie To Kolob” is not the only work of Latter-day Saint poetry that has taken at least part of its inspiration from this concept found in the Book of Abraham. See also, for example, W. W. Phelps, Deseret Almanac, for the Year of Our Lord, 1852 (Salt Lake City: W. Richards, 1852), 8, 10; J. McD., “Gazing at the Comet,” Ogden Junction, July 11, 1874, [3]; “Hymn 203,” in Joel H. Johnson, Hymns of Praise for the Young: Selected from the Songs of Joel (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882), 192–93; and Orson F. Whitney, Elias: An Epic for the Ages (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1904), 30, 104, 120.
Although there are still many uncertainties, a few points in favor of the name and concept of Kolob being authentically ancient can be affirmed with reasonable certainty.

First is the matter of the etymology of the name Kolob. One of the more common proposals is that the name derives from the Semitic root *qlb,* meaning “heart, center, middle,” and so forth, and is thus related to the Semitic root *qrb,* meaning “to be near, close.” This explanation is enticing because throughout the third chapter of the Book of Abraham, Kolob is conceptually linked with the idea of being near God and his celestial residence (vv. 2–3, 9–10, 16). It thus works well as a pun on the name within the Book of Abraham itself:

- “the name of the great one is Kolob, because it is near unto me [that is the Lord]” (v. 3, emphasis added).
- “until thou come nigh unto Kolob, which Kolob is after the reckoning of the Lord's time; which Kolob is set nigh unto the throne of God, to govern all those planets which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest” (v. 9, emphasis added).
- “therefore Kolob is the greatest of all the Kokaubeam [stars] that thou hast seen, because it is nearest unto me” (v. 16, emphasis added).

The drawback to this theory, however, is that *qlb* as a Semitic word for “heart, center” is only attested in Semitic languages as far back as Arabic (*qalb*; “heart, core”), which emerged considerably later than Abraham's

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time. However, some scholars believe that the Semitic qrb (and Arabic qalb) are ultimately derived from the reconstructed Afroasiatic root *klb/krb, which has attested cognate descendants in Egyptian (k3b; “interior, midst”), Akkadian (qerbum; “inside”), and Hebrew (qereb; “inside, middle”). The Egyptian example (k3b) is especially interesting, because there is evidence that the Egyptian aleph /3/ in Abraham’s day was used to render the liquid consonants /r/ and /l/ in Semitic languages. This strengthens the etymology for Kolob proposed above and the likelihood of genuine Semitic-Egyptian paronomasia in the text of the Book of Abraham.

Another promising proposal is that Kolob derives from the Semitic root klb, meaning “dog.” This theory has been circulating since at least the early twentieth century, when a non-Latter-day Saint named James E. Homans (writing under the pseudonym Robert C. Webb) postulated this idea in 1913. This, in turn, has prompted some to identify...
Kolob with Sirius, the dog-star. This theory actually goes back as far as the mid-nineteenth century, when William W. Phelps captured the idea in an 1857 poem. Known as Sopdet in ancient Egypt (or Sothis in Greek), Sirius held both mythological and calendrical significance to the ancient Egyptians. Usually associated with the goddesses Isis and Hathor, the star Sirius "had a special role because its heliacal rising coincided with the ideal Egyptian New Year day that was linked with the onset of the Nile inundation." Both Sirius and Kolob share a number of overlapping characteristics, including the following:

- Both are associated with the throne of God.
- Both are recognized as the “greatest” (probably meaning brightest) of stars in earth’s night sky.

14. W. W. Phelps, “Here We Are,” *Deseret News*, January 28, 1857, 373; compare “Inside View of Mormonism,” *Weekly Herald* (New York), May 2, 1857, 139; and “Mormonism,” *Cheshire Republican*, May 13, 1857, [1]. The relevant portion of the poem—described by the latter two sources as “a poetical, astronomical plea for polygamy”—reads: “Shine you with the stars to-night— / Where the ‘Dog-stars’ ever eye us, / As the upper sons of light? / What if Kolob is Si-ri us? / God, who’s Adam, with a madam. / Brought our garden seeds from there,— / Nightly singing—‘Here we are.’”
16. One of the ancient Egyptian epithets for Sopdet/Sirius was w“b t swt or “pure of thrones” in Pyramid Text 442 (§822a) and Pyramid Text 504 (§1082d). The image of the Throne of God in the heavens is commonplace in the Bible (for example, Ps. 11:4; 103:19; Matt. 5:34; 23:22; and Rev. 4:1–2, 5–6).
17. “[Seirios] originally was employed to indicate any bright and sparkling heavenly object, but in the course of time became a proper name for this brightest of all the stars.” Richard Hinckley Allen, *Star-Names and Their Meanings* (New York: G. E. Stechert, 1899), 120. “Greek writers made special reference to Sirius, the brilliant star in the constellation [Canis Major]. The name has been derived from Seirios, ‘sparkling.’ This term was at first employed to indicate any bright sparkling object in the sky, and was also applied to the Sun. But after a time, the name was given to the brightest of all stars.” Charles Whyte, *The Constellations and Their History* (London: Charles Griffin, 1928), 231–32. “[Sirius] is the brightest of the fixed stars . . . [and] has been throughout human history the most brilliant of the permanent fixed stars.” Robert Burnham Jr., *Burnham’s Celestial Handbook: An Observer’s Guide to the Universe beyond the Solar System* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978), 1:387, 390. “Among the brightest stars of the northern
• Both are depicted as governing other stars.¹⁸
• Both are associated with creation.¹⁹
• Both are significant in measuring time.

While these convergences are compelling, the identification of Kolob as Sirius faces some difficulties. For starters, most of Sirius’s features just reviewed are attested in Egyptian sources from the Greco-Roman Period, long after Abraham’s day (although it may be significant that this is the time period of the Joseph Smith Papyri). The Egyptian word for “dog” (iw) is also quite different from the Semitic word for the same.²⁰

Furthermore, Ancient Mesopotamian astronomical texts do speak of a star or constellation called Kalbu (Dog),²¹ but it is unclear if this Kalbu was identified anciently with the constellation Canis Major (which contains Sirius) or another, such as Hercules.²² By the Greco-Roman period, winter sky, Sirius is prominent as the principal star of the constellation Canis Major, Latin for the Greater Dog.” Holberg, Sirius, 15.

18. As “the star which fixes and governs the periodic return of the year” (James Bonwick, Egyptian Belief and Modern Thought [London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878], 113) and the annual inundation of the Nile, Sirius (specifically its godly manifestation as Hathor/Isis) bore the epithets “Lady of the beginning of the year, Sothis, Mistress of the stars” (nbt tp rpnt spedt lw tw hsbt ss), and “Sothis in the sky, the Female Ruler of the stars” (spdt m pt hkw n[t] hsbt ss). Barbara A. Richter, The Theology of Hathor of Dendera: Aural and Visual Scribal Techniques in the Per-Wer Sanctuary (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2016), 4 n. 8, 96.

19. Richter, Theology of Hathor of Dendera, 4 n. 8, 96–97, 173, 185; Holberg, Sirius, 14. One late Egyptian text describes Sirius as “[the one] who created those who created us” (r-ir km m ir km-n), making the star the supreme creator, as it were. “She is Sirius and all things were created through her” (spt tsw mt-w ir mt nb r-hr-s). Wilhelm Spiegelberg, Der Ägyptische Mythus vom Sonnenauge (Strassburg, Ger.: Georg Olms Verlag, 1917), 28–29.


22. Older scholarship identified Kalbu with Sirius (for example, Allen, Star-Names and Their Meanings, 123; and George A. Barton, “The Babylonian Calendar in the Reigns of Luganda and Urkagina,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 31, no. 3 [1911]: 266–67), whereas more recent scholarship identifies it with Hercules (for example, Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute, s.v. kalbu; Douglas B. Miller and R. Mark Shipp, An Akkadian Handbook: Paradigms, Helps, Glossary, Logograms, and Sign List [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996], 55; and Black, George, Postgate, A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian, 142). Hunger and Steele, Babylonian Astronomical Compendium MUL.APIN, leave the identification of Kalbu unspecified. In Syriac, kelab does refer to Sirius, as it does in Arabic (al-kalb al-akbar, “the great dog”), although both languages postdate Abraham
there is evidence that Sirius (Isis-Sothis) was “represented as a large dog,” and it is possible that this representation predates Abraham’s day, although this point is disputed among Egyptologists. Additionally, scholars who study ancient astronomical texts emphasize that “the identifications between the ancient names and modern names [for stars and constellations] are only approximate and are meant to serve as an aid to the modern reader, rather than to imply exact equivalence between ancient and modern constellations.” With this amount of lingering uncertainty, the identification of Kolob with Sirius should therefore be accepted cautiously.

Conceptually, the way Kolob is depicted in the Book of Abraham indicates some awareness (and attempted subversion) of ancient Egyptian cosmology.

The ancient Egyptians associated the idea of encircling something (whether in the sky or on earth) with controlling or governing it, and the same terms are used for both. Thus, the Book of Abraham notes that “there shall be the reckoning of the time of one planet above another, until thou come nigh unto Kolob, . . . which Kolob is set nigh unto the throne of God, to govern all those planets which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest” (Abraham 3:9; emphasis added). The Egyptians had a similar notion, in which the sun (Re) was not only a god but the head of all the gods and ruled over everything that he encircled. Abraham’s astronomy sets the sun, “that which is to rule the day” (Abraham 3:5), as greater than the moon but less than Kolob, which governs the sun (Abraham 3:9). Thus, in the astronomy of the Book of Abraham, Kolob, which is the nearest star to God (Abraham 3:16; see also [3:]3, 9), revolves around and thus encircles or controls the sun, which is the head of the Egyptian pantheon.

considerably, and so it is uncertain if this identification extends as far back as the Middle Bronze Age. R. Payne Smith, A Compendious Syriac Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), 215; Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith, eds. and trans., An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The Book of Curiosities (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2014), 353, 586.


While questions about the identification of Kolob still remain, there are some very tantalizing pieces of evidence that, when brought together, reinforce the overall plausible antiquity of this astronomical concept unique to the Book of Abraham.

Further Reading


