

Potiphar's Hill

Besides Ur of the Chaldees and the plain of Olishem, one of the geographical features of the Book of Abraham is a location called Potiphar's Hill, which is said to be "at the head of the plain of Olishem" in the land of Chaldea (Abr. 1:10). It was at this hill that "the priest of Pharaoh"—who was also in the service of a solar deity named Shagreel—made offerings on an altar (vv. 9–10). Other sacrifices were made at this site, and it also appears to have been the site of local idol worship (vv. 11–12).

Hugh Nibley was one of the first to argue that Potiphar's Hill functioned as what scholars today call a cult center, meaning a location of special religious significance that was dedicated to the worship of a particular deity or group of deities.¹ Cult centers dotted the landscape of the ancient Near East, including Mesopotamia, Anatolia, the Levant, and

1. Hugh Nibley, "The Unknown Abraham, Part 7 (Continued)," *Improvement Era* 72, no. 3 (March 1969): 76–84, reprinted in 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, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009), 405–18; *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary P. Gillum, 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), 236–37; Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 19 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 171–73. Before Nibley, Richards Durham conducted an unpublished study of Potiphar's Hill and the five gods associated with this location (Elkenah, Libnah, Mahmackrah, Pharaoh, and Shagreel), arguing that this named site and attending gods in the Book of Abraham functioned as a deity complex. Whatever the deficiencies in Durham's proposed etymologies for the names of the deities in the text, he was perceptive to notice how Potiphar's Hill functions as a cult center or deity complex. See Richards Durham, "'Potiphar's Hill' and the 'Canopic' Complex of the Gods," unpublished manuscript, 1960, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Egypt. “The cult centers of the ancient world were the prime location and focus of ritual activity. Temples and shrines were not constructed in isolation, but existed as part of what may be termed a ritual landscape, where ritualized movement within individual buildings, temple complexes, and the city as a whole shaped their function and meaning.”² At each site was often a shrine or temple dedicated to the chief deity being worshipped, although multiple deities (typically the chief deity and his or her divine consort) were sometimes worshipped at the same cult center.³ In ancient Syria and Anatolia, pilgrimages were frequently made to cult sites in the countryside,⁴ and “at each cult center, the gods were [given] offerings of food and drink. . . . The deities also received animal sacrifices, particularly at the great festivals.”⁵ Similar to what is depicted in the Book of Abraham, “even human sacrifice, though rare, was not unknown.”⁶

The worshippers at Potiphar's Hill were engaged in a form of Egyptian-Canaanite syncretic religious practice. The Egyptian element in the narrative is obvious from the god (and priest) of Pharaoh being present in the scene. It can also be seen in the name Potiphar. Famously

2. Deena Ragavan, “Heaven on Earth: Temples, Ritual, and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World,” in *Heaven on Earth: Temples, Ritual, and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World*, ed. Deena Ragavan (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2013), 1.

3. For example, “although a large structure like the Karnak Temple was dedicated to the resident god Amun, the complex included temples to his consort Mut, their child Khonsu, and also other gods, including Ptah, Montu, Opet, a variety of forms of Osiris, and past king(s).” Emily Teeter, “Egypt,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, ed. Barabette Stanley Spaeth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 21. In ancient Anatolia, the *kurša*-festival “was performed in the [Hittite] capital for two gods who came originally from other cult centers. Maintaining these two gods in Hattuša required providing a place for them, the ‘house of the hunting bags,’ their temple. Thus the cults of certain provincial deities were transferred to the capital.” Gregory McMahon, *The Hittite State Cult of the Tutelary Deities* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1991), 213. It was also in ancient Hattuša where two separate shrines (one for the Storm God, the other for the Sun Goddess) were housed in the main temple of the city. Billie Jean Collins, “Anatolia,” in Spaeth, *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, 102.

4. Lauren Ristvet, *Ritual, Performance, and Politics in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 40–89, especially 68–69, 74–82.

5. William H. Stiebing Jr., *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 215; compare Collins, “Anatolia,” 100–108; Alice Mouton, “Animal Sacrifice in Hittite Anatolia,” in *Animal Sacrifice in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. Sarah Hitch and Ian Rutherford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 239–52.

6. Stiebing, *Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture*, 215, citing CTH 426, the so-called “ritual between the pieces” that directs a human sacrifice, probably a prisoner of war, be cut in half along with different animals as part of a purification ritual in the event of a military defeat.

the name of the Egyptian officer who bought Joseph as a slave (Gen. 39:1), Potiphar has long been recognized as deriving from the Egyptian *p3-di-p3-Rc* or *p3-di-Pr^c* (“the one whom [the god] Re has given”).⁷ Although the name Potiphar itself is only currently attested after Abraham’s day, the grammatical formula used in the name (*p3-di-[X]*; “the one whom [such-and-such god] has given”) appears to be based on an earlier formula that is found plentifully in Egyptian names from Abraham’s day.⁸ The Re element in the name Potiphar links the name (and thereby the cult site in the Book of Abraham) with solar worship, inasmuch as Re was the chief solar deity of ancient Egypt.⁹ This explains why the idolatrous priest in the Book of Abraham is depicted in the text as making an offering to the god of Shagreel, which is identified as a sun deity (Abr. 1:9). The veneration of this deity in Egypt predates Abraham’s

7. See the discussions in James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84–85; Kenneth A. Kitchen, “Genesis 12–50 in the Near Eastern World,” in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, ed. Richard S. Hess, Gordon J. Wenham, and Philip E. Satterthwaite, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book, 1994), 85–86; and Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 346–47.

8. Kitchen, “Genesis 12–50 in the Near Eastern World,” 86, citing Hermann Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen*, 3 vols. (Glückstadt, Ger.: Verlag von J. J. Augustin, 1935), 1:401–4, who documents abundant examples of both the masculine (*dd[w]+[X]*) and feminine (*ddt+[X]*) versions of the formula in names from the Middle Kingdom.

9. For an overview of this deity and his worship, see Stephen Quirke, *The Cult of Ra: Sun-Worship in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001); and Maya Muller, “Re and Re-Horakhty,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald B. Redford, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3:123–26.

day by many centuries,¹⁰ so it is not at all inconceivable that the name could have been as old as Abraham, even if it is not yet attested.¹¹

What's more, "very good knowledge . . . of the Egyptian iconographic patrimony" is attested in northern Syria at sites such as Ebla, where "Egyptianiz[ed]" ivories bearing the iconography of multiple Egyptian deities have been recovered.¹² Some of these recovered ivories include samples featuring "the crocodile god Sobek, gods having the head of the falcon Horus, and a goddess bearing the horns and the sun disc of Hathor. Such figures appear frequently in the contemporary Syrian glyptic of the classical Old Syrian style, where they are shown with divine figures of the Syrian pantheon and kings and officials of the northern Syrian kingdoms."¹³ According to one scholar, "Egyptian and Egyptianising scenes and figures constitute c. 14 per cent of the total iconographical repertoire of published Syrian seals."¹⁴ Solar deities such as Re-Horakhty

10. In addition to Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 205–9; and Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 183, for a discussion of the mythology of Re that stretches to the dawn of Egyptian civilization, see Quirke, *Cult of Ra*, 73–114, for an overview of the history and significance of Heliopolis (biblical On and Egyptian Iunu), the "city of the sun" that was the location of a significant cult dedicated to Re(-Atum) beginning as early as the Old Kingdom (potentially as early as the twenty-seventh century BC). "By the time of the Old Kingdom, the city was established as a center of astronomy, as reflected in the title of its high priest, 'Chief of Observers.' The city also had a reputation for learning and theological speculation, which it retained into Greco-Roman times; much of that was centered on the role of the sun in the creation and maintenance of the world and in the persons of the gods Atum and Re-Horakhty. . . . [The city's] principal feature was a temple devoted to Atum and Re-Horakhty, the precise location and shape of which is uncertain." James P. Allen, "Heliopolis," in Redford, *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 2:88.

11. The name in Abraham's day could have feasibly been simply **dd(w)-R*ϕ, which Joseph Smith rendered as the more familiar Potiphar in his translation. Compare the observation in Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 347, on how the name was linguistically updated in the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, which both took place chronologically and was composed centuries after Abraham's day.

12. Gabriella Scandone Matthiae, "The Relations between Ebla and Egypt," in *The Hyksos: New Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Eliezer D. Oren (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1997), 415–27, quote at 421.

13. Paolo Matthiae, "Elba," in *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.*, ed. Joan Aruz, Kim Benzel, and Jean M. Evans (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 37.

14. Beatrice Teissier, *Egyptian Iconography on Syro-Palestinian Cylinder Seals of the Middle Bronze Age* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press Fribourg, 1996), 47.

and Hathor are attested in this corpus (sometimes sporting a sun disc above their heads).¹⁵ The picture presented in the Book of Abraham of Abraham's kinsfolk adopting elements of Egyptian solar religion into their own native Chaldean worship of the sun deity Shagreel is therefore plausible based on current evidence.¹⁶

But what is the significance of this cult site in the Book of Abraham featuring a hill? "In the ancient civilizations from Egypt to India and beyond, the mountain can be a center of fertility, the primeval hillock of creation, the meeting place of the gods, the dwelling place of the high god, the meeting place of heaven and earth, the monument effectively upholding the order of creation, the place where god meets man, a place of theophany."¹⁷ As Nibley observed, the Book of Abraham appears to link Potiphar's Hill with this concept of the mythological primeval hillock—the sacred *Urhügel* "marking the first land to emerge from the great waters and the place where the sun first rose on the day of creation."¹⁸ The concept of "a mound of earth that emerged as the first dry land when the primeval waters receded" was foundational to the Egyptian view of the cosmos, being "one of the earliest known Egyptian images of the creation." So central was this idea in Egyptian religious imagination that "many Egyptian temples had a mound of earth in their sanctuary, which not only commemorated this primeval hill but which also was viewed as *the* primeval mound."¹⁹ The placement of an altar next to a hill, as depicted in Abraham 1:10, thus fits nicely the pattern of ancient ritual complexes.

Ancient Syrian-Levantine and Anatolian peoples shared a similar conception of the cosmic mountain as a place of great cultic and mythic

15. Teissier, *Egyptian Iconography on Syro-Palestinian Cylinder Seals*, 47–55.

16. See further "Sobek, the God of Pharaoh," 83–87 herein.

17. Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972), 5.

18. Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 171; compare Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 405–18, esp. 412–13.

19. James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 160–61, emphasis in original; compare *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), throughout, but especially 10, 25, 32, 46, 50–51, 53, 58, 60, 63; compare John M. Lundquist, "The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East," in *The Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 59–66.

importance often associated with the temple or sacred space.²⁰ “Worship of the Hittite gods was . . . frequently carried out in sacred precincts on rocks or mountains. Open-air sanctuaries were commonplace in Anatolia, particularly where some natural feature, such as a large rock outcropping or a spring, lent itself to the numinous.” Texts recovered at some of these sites “often refer to rituals taking place on mountains, which were considered, from early Hittite times, to be the place where the presence of the celestial deities (especially the storm gods) could be felt, and where special ceremonies devoted to their worship were performed.”²¹ All of this is in harmony with the Book of Abraham’s description of Potiphar’s Hill (Abr. 1:9–11), which is said to be a place of syncretic Egyptian-Canaanite cultic activity (“made an offering unto the god of Pharaoh, and also unto the god of Shagreel, even after the manner of the Egyptians”) that featured sacred architecture (“the altar,” “this altar”) as well as a local priesthood (“priest of Pharaoh,” “the priests”). It was also a place of revelation and theophany, since it was at this site where Abraham was “filled with the vision of the Almighty” and delivered by Jehovah after “the priests laid violence upon [him], that they might slay [him] also, as they did those virgins upon this altar” at the hill (vv. 12, 15; compare vv. 15–19).

Further Reading

Nibley, Hugh. *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee, 405–18. *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 18. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009.

20. Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*; Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 113–20.

21. Collins, “Anatolia,” 102–3.