

Zeptah and Egyptes

The Book of Abraham describes how “the land of Egypt [was] first discovered by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham, and the daughter of Egyptus” (Abr. 1:23). This woman “discovered the land [when] it was under water, who afterward settled her sons in it; and thus, from Ham, sprang that race which preserved the curse in the land.” Thereafter “the first government of Egypt was established by Pharaoh, the eldest son of Egyptus, the daughter of Ham” (vv. 24–25).

This genealogy in the Book of Abraham reflects the names of the characters as printed in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons*.¹ Two of the names in this genealogy, however, are rendered differently in the 1835 Kirtland-era Book of Abraham manuscripts. As has been long recognized,² the name of Ham’s wife in all three of the Kirtland-era manuscripts is either “Zep-tah” or “Zeptah” instead of Egyptus.³ Additionally, the name of Ham and Zeptah’s (or Egyptus’s) daughter is Egyptes in the Kirtland-era manuscripts, as opposed to Egyptus.⁴ The name Zeptah is striking because it could very likely be a rendering of the Egyptian

1. “Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 705.

2. See, for instance, James R. Clark, *The Story of the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 127; Richards Durham, “‘Zeptah-Egyptus,’ a New Chapter in the Study of the Book of Abraham,” 1958, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; and Walter L. Whipple, “An Analysis of Textual Changes in ‘The Book of Abraham’ and in the ‘Writings of Joseph Smith, the Prophet’ in the Pearl of Great Price” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1959), 54–56.

3. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018), 199, 211, 227.

4. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 199, 211, 227.

A. F. The land of Egypt being first discovered by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham; and the daughter of Zep-tah, which in the Chaldee signifies Egypt, which signifies that which is forbidden. When this woman discovered the land it was under water, who after settled her sons in it; and thus from them sprang that race which preserved the curse in the land.

A. F. The land of Egypt, being first discovered, by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham, and the daughter of Zep-tah, which in the Chaldee, signifies Egypt, which signifies that which is forbidden. When this woman discovered the land, it was under water, who after settled his sons in it; and thus from Ham sprang that race which preserved, the curse in the land.

FIGURES 21 AND 22. Top: "Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–A," [3]. Bottom: "Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–B," 4. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The name "Zep-tah" or "Zep-tah" is visible on the second line from the top of Book of Abraham Manuscript–A and on the fourth line of the second full paragraph in the middle of Book of Abraham Manuscript–B.

name Siptah (*sꜣ Pth*), meaning “son of [the god] Ptah.”⁵ This name, as well as its feminine equivalent “daughter of [the god] Ptah” (*sꜣt Pth*), is attested during the likely time of Abraham.⁶ It is also the name of an Egyptian king who lived many centuries after Abraham.⁷

The original pronunciation of Zeptah is unknown, since we have no surviving indication of how Joseph Smith intended the name to be pronounced. Was the /e/ phoneme in the first syllable in Zeptah short (/ɛ/ as in *bed*) or long (/i:/ as in *keep* or the name *Egypt*)? While impossible to prove, /i:/ (“ZEE-Ptah”) would be more congruent with how *sꜣ* (“son”) is believed to have been pronounced in Middle Egyptian and how it is later attested in Demotic.⁸ The spelling of the name with a Z instead of an S is not a problem for the Book of Abraham, since in the Egyptian language of Abraham’s time “these two consonants were pronounced the same, like English *s* as in *set*.” They were “essentially one consonant in [the Egyptian language of this time], and could often be written interchangeably,”⁹ having “become graphic variants of the same phoneme /s/.”¹⁰

The name Egyptes/Egyptus is clearly related to the name Egypt, which comes from the Greek *Aigyptos* (Latin: *Aegyptus*). *Aigyptos* is a

5. The god Ptah was “one of the oldest of Egypt’s gods,” with evidence for his worship as far back as the Early Dynastic Period (ca. 3100–2700 BC). Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 123; Jacobus Van Dijk, “Ptah,” in *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion*, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 322. Among his other attributes, Ptah was imagined early on as a craftsman and creator god and was later associated with Nun and Nunet, the godly personifications of the primeval waters of creation. Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182. This may have significance for the Book of Abraham’s depiction of Egypt being “under water” when it was first discovered by Zeptah and her family.

6. Hermann Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen* (Glückstadt, Ger.: Verlag von J. J. Augustin, 1935), 1:282, 288.

7. Aidan Dodson and Dyan Hilton, *The Complete Royal Families of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 181; Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 243–44; Ronald J. Leprohon, *The Great Name: Ancient Egyptian Royal Titulary* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 124. The name is also attested much later in the Neo-Babylonian period. A. C. V. M. Bongenaar and B. J. J. Haring, “Egyptians in Neo-Babylonian Sippar,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 46 (1994): 70.

8. Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 56; Erich Lüddeckens, *Demotisches Namenbuch*, Band 1, Lieferung 12 (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1993), 900–905.

9. James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 19.

10. Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*, 34.

rendering of one of the Egyptian names for the ancient city of Memphis, which contains the theophoric Ptah element (*ḥwt-k3-Pth*; literally “the estate of the *Ka* [spirit] of [the god] Ptah”).¹¹ Since Egyptes/Egyptus is a Greek name that would be anachronistic for Abraham’s day, it might reflect the work of ancient scribes transmitting the text who “updated” the name centuries later. This may likewise have been the case with the name Zeptah as well.¹²

We don’t know for certain why Joseph Smith changed the names Zep-tah and Egyptes when he published the Book of Abraham in 1842. The change from Egyptes to Egyptus might easily be explained as the modern scribe(s) for the Book of Abraham originally mishearing the name and being corrected later.¹³ The change from Zeptah to Egyptus is harder to explain. It could have been the result of scribe Willard Richards incorrectly copying the name shortly before the Book of Abraham was published.¹⁴ Another possibility is that the Prophet or one of his scribes who read through the text of the Book of Abraham beforehand substituted a more familiar name for the less familiar one to make it more consistent with other names in the text.¹⁵

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), 526–39; compare Manetho, *Aegyptiaca*, 1.5.

12. “The transmission of [ancient] documents allowed for updating of language,” including place names and personal names. John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2013), 32. This is seen in the Bible where the names of two of King Saul’s sons are given as Ishbosheth and Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel but are rendered Eshbaal and Meribbaal in 1 Chronicles. While not all scholars agree on the meaning of this divergence, many think the *baal* (as in the god Baal) element was deliberately replaced by scribes with *bosheth* (the Hebrew word for “shame”). See the discussion in Michael Avioz, “The Names Mephibosheth and Ishbosheth Reconsidered,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 32, no. 1 (2011): 11–20. City names might also be updated by scribes so that the older name is given along with the name the city was known by at the time the scribe was working. This is seen in Judges 18:29: “They named the city Dan, after their ancestor Dan, who was born to Israel; but the name of the city was formerly Laish.” Examples of Egyptian scribes actively “updating” and “expanding” the language of older texts, including names and epithets, can also be cited. See, for instance, Emile Cole, “Interpretation and Authority: The Social Functions of Translation in Ancient Egypt” (PhD diss., UCLA, 2015), 167–71, 201–5; and the discussion in Emily Cole, “Language and Script in the Book of the Dead,” in *Book of the Dead: Becoming God in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Foy Scalf (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2017), 41–48.

13. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 292 n. 78.

14. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 261.

15. One author has suggested that the name was changed “for consistency,” since Joseph had already “translated or transliterated the name of the country as *Egypt*.” This

But why might a woman have a masculine name like Zeptah? There are attested examples of the feminine *-t* ending dropping from names that include *sꜣt* (“daughter”),¹⁶ and it could be that the same thing happened in the name Zeptah. Another possibility is that the name was confused by ancient scribes copying the text after Abraham’s lifetime. This seems to have happened before to other ancient Egyptian figures; including, potentially, a male Egyptian king named Netjerkare Siptah who lived before Abraham’s lifetime and who appears to have been mistaken as a beautiful woman for almost two thousand years because of ancient scribal mistakes.¹⁷ Perhaps a similar problem happened when the Book of Abraham was copied over the centuries.

Alternatively, Egyptologist Vivienne G. Callender argues that Netjerkare Siptah was in fact a woman ruler named Neitikrety Siptah, despite the masculine form of Siptah in her name.

Perhaps the presence of the phrase, ‘Son of Ptah’, . . . may have been a specific tribute to the Memphite god, who was particularly prominent at this time. The masculinity of this name . . . is not a problem for a feminine ruler, because the masculine filiation, *sꜣ Rꜥ* [son of Re], was later used by other female rulers, such as Sobekneferu, who fluctuated between using male and female nomenclature. Sobekneferu, Hatshepsut and Tausret all used various forms of masculine display or titulary when they were rulers, so, if she had been a female ruler, perhaps Neitikrety may have done the same, and the title, *sꜣ Pth*, may have been used to indicate that her monarchy was different from that of the other rulers who used *sꜣ Rꜥ* in the Old Kingdom.¹⁸

If this argument is correct, then we would have an attested ancient Egyptian female personality using precisely the same masculine name as

makes sense, because “Joseph Smith was translating the papyrus into English for readers who were already commonly familiar with this nomenclature.” Clark, *Story of the Pearl of Great Price*, 127, emphasis in original. Another possibility is that the change was made because the Prophet or one of his clerks had come to view Zeptah and Egyptes as the same person. The story seems to still work if they are viewed as the same person, but the textual history makes it seem more likely that these are two different women. For another proposed explanation for this change, see Brent Lee Metcalfe, “The Curious Textual History of ‘Egyptus’ the Wife of Ham,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 34, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014): 1–11.

16. See, for instance, Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen*, 1:285, 289.

17. Kim Ryholt, “The Late Old Kingdom in the Turin King-list and the Identity of Nitocris,” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 127 (2000): 87–100.

18. Vivienne G. Callender, “Queen Neit-ikrety/Nitokris,” in *Abusir and Saqqara in the Year 2010/2011*, ed. Miroslav Bárta, Filip Coppens, and Jaromír Krejčí (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2011), 256.

in the Book of Abraham. This is mentioned not to positively identify the Book of Abraham's Zeptah with any of these other ancient figures, but rather to note the attestation of the name itself and the phenomenon of women potentially bearing masculine names or titles. So while we may not be able to currently answer these questions entirely, what can be said is that the name Zeptah in the Book of Abraham is, arguably, authentically Egyptian.

Further Reading

Nibley, Hugh. "A Pioneering Mother." In *Abraham in Egypt*, edited by Gary P. Gillum, 466–556. 2nd ed. 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.